

SLAYERS

6 *THE DARKNESS IN VEZENDI*



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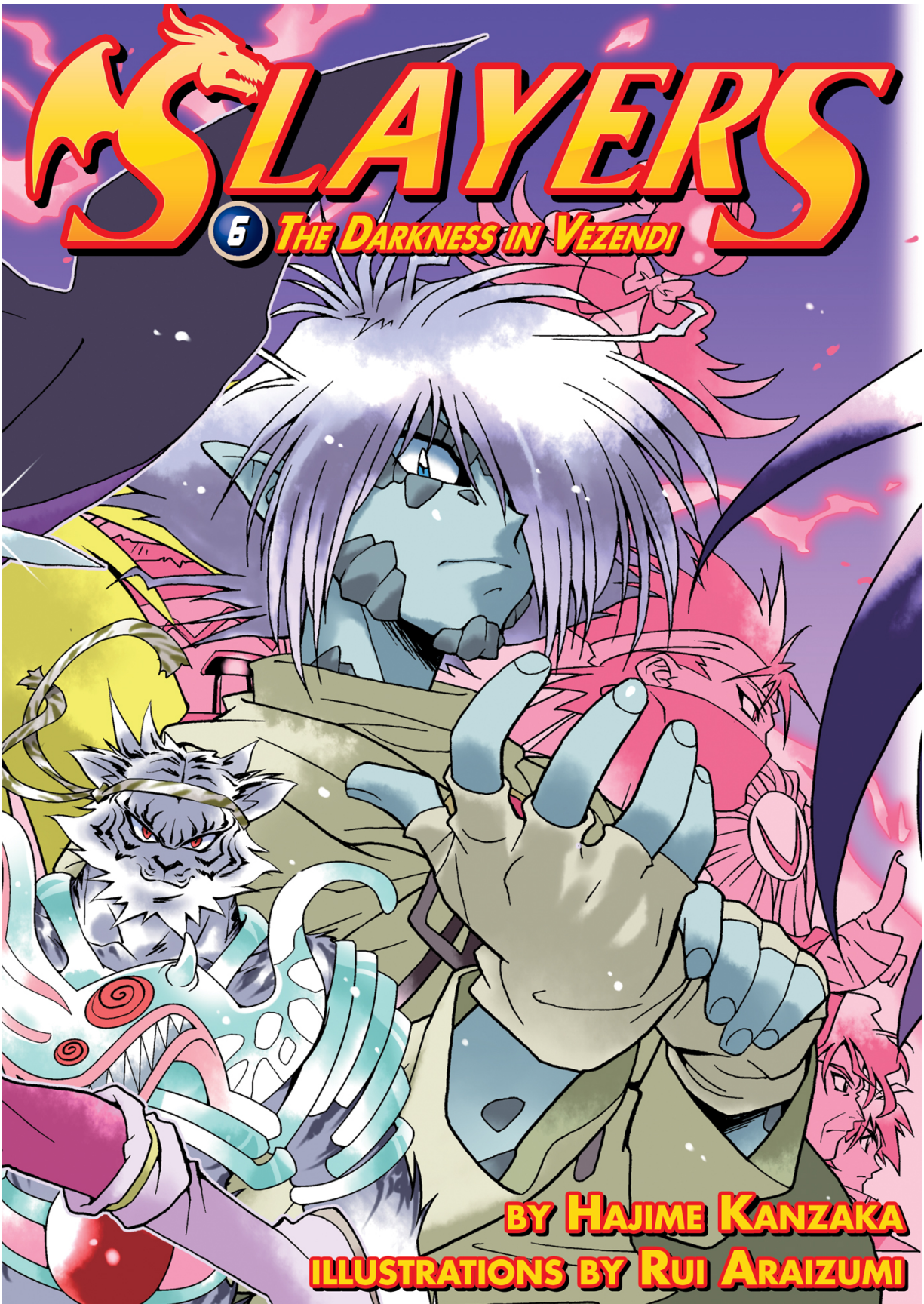




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1: C'mon, Guys, Don't Go Reviving on Me...

I knew I was being tailed, but I pretended not to notice as I made my way down the night road. It was pretty obvious that whoever it was had been stalking me since I left the inn.

Should I head back, or...

I immediately made up my mind to keep going, pressing on toward the city limits. It seemed there were still bars open even at this hour, and the faint sounds of merrymaking drifted by on the wind here and there. Soon enough, however, those too died away.

My stalker continued to follow me as I left the city behind. By the time I made it onto the road that led through the forest, clouds had come to smother the full moon overhead... which plunged the area into darkness. I used the opportunity to mask my presence and duck behind a nearby tree. The stalker closed in.

Before long, the moon emerged again and...

"Amelia?!"

"Waaagh?!" she yelped in surprise. "Hey, you scared me!"

"I scared *you*? Amelia, you freakin' stalked me the whole way here! I thought you were a bad guy!"

"Well, I saw you slip out of the inn! I figured you were going to vanquish bandits!"

"Erk!"

She'd hit the nail square on the head so hard there that it left me a little stunned.

"I mean... yeah, of course I am! Why else would a young lady leave her inn in the middle of the night?" I said desperately. "Gourry and Zel would give me the third degree

if they found out about it. They don't understand what a girl needs, but you wouldn't try to stop me, would you?!"

Amelia shook her head fervently, lightning flashing behind her as she declared, "No way! I'm coming with!"

Hang on a minute...

"Are you... serious?" I found myself asking.

"Of course! Bandits are evil's conspirators, stealing from others to satisfy their own self-interest! Such wickedness cannot stand! We must vanquish them posthaste!" And with that, she began to march off on her own.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" I cried, quickly trying to stop her.

Amelia halted, turned around, and asked, "You're not gonna tell *me* not to come, are you?"

"Nah," I said, holding up a declarative finger. "But we split the treasure fifty-fifty!"

Shortly thereafter, attack spells blossomed in the midnight forest.

"Hmm... It was a smaller haul than I expected. I guess life's tough for a bandit in the boonies," I muttered as we walked the road back to the inn, our packs filled with loot.

Geographically speaking, we were out in the northern countryside of the Duchy of Kalmaart, a good ways away from most major cities and highways. It was the kind of place where you wouldn't necessarily expect to run into bandits, but I guess in this day and age, you're never completely out of evil's reach.

There was once a time when I'd been worried that my nightly scourging of bandit gangs everywhere I went might actually turn them into an endangered species warranting state protection or something... but it seemed my fears were unfounded after all. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Eh, you be the judge.

Honestly, I was a bit bummed about this latest excursion. I'd successfully blown off some stress, but I was lacking any serious coin to show for it—meaning I'd only accomplished

one of my two goals for the night. At least Amelia was in high spirits...

"You can't let it get you down!" she insisted upon noticing my listless demeanor. "What's important here is that we extinguished another den of evil! The day justice reigns supreme is still a long way off, but we've made one step in the right direction!"

Yeah, yeah...

"Listen, Amelia... do you know where our traveling funds have been coming from lately?"

She spent some time in silent consideration, then said, "Um... you mean..."

I nodded firmly, my expression pensive.

Gourry didn't have a care in the world, and Amelia's only care was "justice." Zelgadis was reserved about showing his face, and he'd long given up his badguy gig...

So who the hell else was supposed to make money for us?!

It would've been one thing if we were in a big city or on a main thoroughfare and we weren't in any kind of hurry. But right now, we didn't have time to guard caravans or play courier. With our expenses piling up, I had no choice but to slip out late at night and ice local bandit gangs in an attempt to refill our coffers.

And, yes, okay, I admit it's a ton of fun. I also admit I take a cut for my own pocket... But, c'mon, it's basically just a commission. A little something for my trouble, y'know?

While I was turning all this over...

"Wait, Lina," Amelia said urgently.

Hearing that, I stopped to ask, "What is it? Need a potty break?"

She shook her head and replied, now dead serious, "Someone's here... Or rather, *something*."

I quickly looked around, reaching out with my senses. The only illumination in the night-cloaked forest came from a small Lighting spell I had floating over my head. And the

only sounds I heard were insects and night birds. Nothing particularly unusual...

"I don't sense anything, Amelia."

"It's there," she assured me with confidence.

Girls who served as shrine maidens often developed a kind of extrasensory perception. Amelia, it seemed, was no exception. She was probably on the nose here. Did that mean we were up against someone with the ability to completely mask their location from both of us? I stood back to back with Amelia as I slowly drew the shortsword from my hip.

As I did... the insects went quiet. Silence fell over the dark forest, and a wave of surging hostility washed over me!

"It's here!" she shouted.

I whipped around and spotted a shadow darting through the dark.

Wait a minute...

I quickly chanted a spell, but I didn't finish it in time. The shadow was upon me. I swung my sword in desperation.

Clink! The shadow effortlessly snapped the blade between its hands.



“Ngh!” I swiftly leaped back. The shadow’s leg lashed out, aimed right at my solar plexus. I couldn’t get out of the way!

Whoosh! The shadow suddenly flew backward without making contact.

Amelia had unleashed a kick of her own in the nick of time that had sent it sailing. It stopped where it landed and held its ground.

“Who are you?!” Amelia asked as she straightened up, but I was the one who answered.

“Hang on, I know this guy... I remember those moves,” I said, glaring at the shadow. “I really could’ve done without ever seeing you again... Zuma.”

“Are you sure?!” Amelia asked, her eyes still locked on the shadowy assassin.

C’mon, you’ve seen the guy before...

Granted, he was clad all in black with his face completely concealed except for his eyes... which was basically your standard assassin getup. It was no wonder Amelia couldn’t differentiate him from a more generic specimen.

As for this specific assassin, however, we had a history. He’d tried to kill me once and ended up in a fight with Gourry that cost him both arms. He’d fled in the end, but... he seemed to be back in fighting shape now somehow. Although I knew that high-ranked priests and such could restore limbs, I never thought failing to finish him then would lead to an encounter like this.

“What do you even want?! The person who hired you to kill me is dead! We killed him!” I knew parley was pointless, but I decided to give it a try anyway.

His response was as blunt as a cigar: “I haven’t finished the job I was paid for yet.”

Yeesh, of all the dang occupations to be a consummate professional about...

“I can see that reasoning will get us nowhere with you!” Amelia said, pointing dramatically at Zuma.

You didn’t even try reasoning with him, girl...

“Denizen of the darkness who trades human lives for money! If you cannot see the blood that stains your hands, you shall ever be denied salvation! Even if you evade the law’s judgment, I swear in heaven’s name that you shall never evade mine!”

Translated into Real Person Speak, I think she was basically saying, “Repent or I’ll kill you, stupid assassin!” Which suited me just fine, I guess.

“If you still have an ounce of human compassion—”

“Flare Arrow!” I cried, unleashing a spell that interrupted Amelia’s seemingly endless speech.

A dozen or so fiery arrows hung in the air for a second, then streaked straight toward the assassin. No way could he dodge them all!

“Guum Aeon,” he whispered... and my flaming arrows shattered midair!

“Huh?!” Amelia and I exclaimed simultaneously.

He’d probably pegged my attack and chanted that spell in advance... though I’d never seen nor heard of it before.

Next, Zuma made a beeline for me. I quickly started chanting a followup spell, but was I going to get it off in time?!

“Not so fast!”

Amelia ran forward, dashing at Zuma. When she did... Zuma suddenly changed course! He was going for her now!

“What?!” she cried in shock, her timing completely thrown off.

Whump! She took Zuma’s kick straight on and—*Crash!*—slammed hard into the trunk of a nearby tree.

That big jerk! He was trying to take her out first!

Zuma didn’t spare the fallen Amelia so much as a glance before going on the offensive again, his attention back on me. Too bad for him I had my spell ready now...

“Dark Mist!”

When I cast it, Zuma’s eyes went wide. It was a spell he’d used on me once before, after all. The black mist it produced

engulfed the area around the approaching assassin. I couldn't see him this way—but what mattered was that he couldn't see me either.

I changed locations and quietly began chanting a Lighting spell. The moment Zuma emerged from my Dark Mist, I'd blind him with the light and then switch to an attack spell to finish him off!

Except... he never appeared.

"Lina! Above you!" Amelia cried out.

"Lighting!" I responded instantly.

If I'd bothered to look up, I wouldn't have gotten the spell off in time. Instead, I just released it directly overhead! I closed my eyes and rolled away as the searing light from the zero-duration maximum-brightness flash pierced my eyelids.

Above me, I felt that same sense of surprise again. I wondered if I'd successfully managed to blind him, but before I could speculate any further, I felt something touch my right shoulder guard.

"Blast Wave!" came a voice right next to my ear.

Fa-foom! Just like that, my pauldron went boom! If not for Amelia's warning, that could've been my head!

I don't know when he'd leaped out of my Dark Mist, but Zuma had come at me from above. Still, even if it was only temporary, I knew he couldn't see right now! I opened my eyes again and began reciting another spell...

But Zuma came straight at me! Was he following the sound of my voice as I chanted?!

"Elemekia Lance!" Amelia incanted from beside me. Hey, that's my super alloy girl! Even after a kick straight to the gut, she was back on her feet in no time!

"Tch!" Zuma stopped ruefully in his tracks, allowing Amelia's spell to pass right in front of his eyes.

Darn it, he sure wasn't *acting* like he was blinded! Could he be going off of sounds on the wind and our presences?

Whatever! It was my turn now!

"Fireball!"

Bwoosh! Howling wind and flame exploded at Zuma's feet. Yet before the smoke cleared, I saw a shadow leap out of the fire. *Impossible!* I thought to myself as Amelia's voice rang out once more.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Attagirl! I shouted internally. If Zuma was dodging our attacks by reading changes in the wind, then the turbulence from my Fireball should scramble his senses. No way could he dodge all dozen or so icy arrows flying toward him right now! Or so I thought...

But with a sharp exhale and a smooth change of course, Zuma evaded the frigid volley.

Okay, I'm pretty dang sure this guy isn't blind!

Zuma was charging at me again, and as he closed in, I saw it... His eyes were closed! There was no way he should be able to see anything like that!

A chill ran up my spine. With my options few and far between, I threw the broken shortsword still in my hand at Zuma.

The assassin's charge... came to a halt. All was silent except for the rustling grass. The next thing I knew, Zuma was leaping backward.

Huh?

"Come to Vezendi," he said in a low voice. His tone was that of a hunter whose prey had escaped him. "If you don't... someone will die."

And with those words, he whipped around and vanished into the darkness.

"What in the world just happened?" I uttered, standing there in shock.

"Perhaps he feared the arrival of reinforcements?" said a voice from behind me.

"Bwuh?!" I quickly turned around and saw a black-clad figure in the moonlight. I found myself shouting, "Xellos?!"

Indeed, standing there was the mysterious priest I'd met during an unrelated incident.

"So very good to see you again, Miss Lina. You too, Miss Amelia. But you really should be able to defeat an opponent of such mettle yourself..."

"Good to see us again, huh?!" I kept shouting as I grabbed Xellos by the collar.

"Excuse me! Excuse me, Miss Lina?!"

"You've got a lot of nerve showing your face to us again! You're lucky I'm such a nice and forgiving person, but Zelgadis is gonna be pissed—I assume!"

"I see... How very troubling," he said, seeming perfectly untroubled.

"Yeesh," I whispered as I grudgingly released his collar. It was clear that roughing him up wasn't going to do more than exhaust me. "So? What are you here for this time? You clearly weren't just passing by..."

"Of course, that's—"

"A secret, right?" Amelia interrupted.

He smiled brightly in response, raising an index finger as he assented, "Precisely."

"Okay, whatever," I whispered. I figured pressing the issue wouldn't get us anywhere. "Different question, then. What do you intend to do from here?"

"Travel with you for a while, Miss Lina."

"Are you nuts?!" This time, it was Amelia who was shouting. "You... You want to travel with *Lina*?!"

"Hey now..."

"I mean, Master Zelgadis and I have steeled ourselves for the inevitable, and Master Gourry's mental condition makes him oblivious to consequences. But you—"

"Hey! Amelia!"

"I don't know what's driven you to this, but you're too young to throw your life away!"

"Uh, excuse me! This is slander!" I shouted in protest.

"Honestly, Lina..." she replied with a glare. "Do you really think you lead a quiet, peaceful life?"

"Guh..." She had me there. "Well, all that aside... Xellos, I

take it there's nothing Amelia and I can say to change your mind?"

"Certainly not," he said lightly.

Realizing there was no convincing him otherwise, Amelia let out a big sigh.

"Well, the real problem is probably gonna be Zelgadis..." I whispered despondently.

"Yeah, Master Zelgadis will be furious for certain," Amelia agreed.

"Is he really so very angry with me?"

"Yep," Amelia and I responded in unison.

"Oh, that won't do. A grudge is a terrible thing to hold."

"You think that high-minded crap is gonna dissuade him?!"

"You don't think it will? I suppose not, hahaha..." he said with an all-too-leisurely laugh. "But he should know that that manuscript only contained knowledge concerning how to create chimeras, not how to revert them."

"You can tell him that yourself, but I can't promise he's gonna believe you... Good luck, I guess."

"You won't defend me?"

"How am I supposed to defend you when I don't know what the heck you're talking about?"

"I thought we had a sort of honor-among-thieves, meeting-of-the-minds camaraderie between us."

"Yeah, dunno what the heck you're talking about..." I grumbled.

"Don't worry. I see now," Amelia volunteered with a resolute nod.

"Huh?!" I gasped in surprise.

"You do?!" Xellos likewise exclaimed.

She nodded again and clarified, "Yeah, I see that trying to talk this over right now isn't going to accomplish anything."

"Well... that much is true," I admitted with a sigh. "Guess we'll call it a night and figure out the rest tomorrow."

"Agreed."

“Same.”

The three of us nodded to each other and then began the trek back to the inn.

But... *Come to Vezendi...* Zuma’s parting words continued to echo in my head. I wasn’t exactly eager to see him again. I briefly thought about pretending I hadn’t heard him... but I was sure Amelia and Xellos had, and would definitely hold me to account. *If you don’t... someone will die.*

The “someone” in question probably wasn’t any of us, but a denizen of Vezendi. In other words, Zuma was willing to make his point with the life of an innocent bystander.

Welp, guess I know where we’re headed next!

I desperately steeled my resolve as we walked down the dark night road.

“Morning, everyone!”

This enthusiastic greeting came from Gourry, who was up before Zelgadis the next day. All you need to know about Gourry is that he’s an excellent swordsman with nothin’ but jelly between his ears.

We were currently at the eatery on the first floor of our inn. Gourry took a seat at the table with me, Amelia, and Xellos like everything was perfectly normal.

“Boy, I slept like a log last night. What’s for breakfast, you guys?” he continued.

“Uh...”

“What is it, Lina?” he asked.

“Come on!” I said, pointing emphatically at Xellos. “Could you please use what passes for your brain to notice him?!”

“What *passes for* his brain?” Xellos whispered, but I ignored him.

“At least give us the obligatory, ‘You! What are *you* doing here?!’ Or, ‘How dare you show your face again!’ Something! Anything!”

“Er... please stop, Miss Lina. You’re hurting my feelings...”

“No way! Listen, there are things in this world—”

"Hang on a minute, Lina," Gourry interjected, stopping me before I could go any further. "Before I can freak out to your standards, there's something I need you to explain."

"Wait, don't tell me..."

Gourry pensively peered at Xellos and asked, "Who's this guy?"

Splat! Xellos pitched over, chair and all.

"Are... Are you being serious?!" Xellos clamored, straightening up.

Amelia responded with a wince, "Always is, unfortunately..."

"Come on, Gourry! Don't tell me you forgot him!" I railed.

"Please, Master Gourry! Remember when we fought that evil cult?!" Amelia joined in.

Gourry thought a minute, then clapped his hands together in realization.

"Oh! *That* guy!" he exclaimed with a dramatic nod. "What was your name again?"

Blarghsplat! Xellos fell over a second time. He seemed to have a penchant for theatrics.

"You don't remember him *at all*?" I asked.

"Well, I mean..." Gourry hemmed, scratching his head, "I don't think we were ever formally introduced."

Huh... Dude had a point there. Xellos parted ways with us not too long after Gourry rejoined the party. They'd only seen each other maybe twice, and both meetings were brief affairs. There'd never been time for proper introductions.

On top of that, I'd told Xellos plenty about Gourry, but I hadn't bothered telling Gourry about Xellos. I just assumed it'd be a waste of breath, y'know? Come to think of it, I suppose it would've been more remarkable if Gourry *had* remembered him...

"M-My name is Xellos, then. A pleasure," he said weakly.

"Likewise. I'm Gourry," the big lug responded lightly.

Boy, oh boy... I was already exhausted and we hadn't even gotten to Zelgadis yet. But just as that thought crossed

my mind...

"You! What are *you* doing here?!" bellowed a voice from behind me.

"Zel!"

He was dressed in white pants and a matching coat, with a low hood and scarf that hid his face except for his eyes. Zelgadis was a spellsword who'd been fused with a golem and a brow daemon by a sorcerer a long time ago. He'd spent a while doing the "lone wanderer" thing in search of a way to restore his humanity, but he'd been rolling with us of late.

And right now, he was stalking toward Xellos.

"Hey, Zel! Calm down! Think this over!" I urged.

"Master Zelgadis! Let's not be hasty!" Amelia followed suit.

Ignoring our pleas, he continued to walk forward with slow and steady steps, coming to a stop right in front of the priest.

"How dare you show your face again?!" he roared... then turned away and indifferently took a seat next to Gourry. He pulled the scarf down from his mouth and asked, "Now, what's for breakfast?"

"Wait, what? Zel...?" I whispered.

He replied with a quirk of his lips, "Just going through the motions for your sake."

Hey...

"So you were listening to my conversation with Gourry?!"

"Sorta," he said teasingly.

Say, when did this guy become a comedian? You continue to amaze me, Zelgadis!

"You aren't angry?" Amelia asked hesitantly.

He responded casually, "It's not as if I can force an apology out of him. I'd just be riling myself up for nothing."

"Aww," Amelia whimpered, sounding disappointed. Did she *want* there to be a scene or something?

"Er..." Xellos piped up. "Is it just my imagination, or am I

being ignored?”

“Ignored, for sure,” I said plainly.

Xellos then began idly stirring his stew with a spoon, muttering to himself. Pouting, I guess.

“Besides, this is what I was really after,” Zelgadis said casually.

“What is?” I asked.

“That,” he said with a directional nod. “I decided I might find leads faster traveling with you than wandering around on my own. And presto, here’s Xellos.”

Of course...

“And so... *Master* Xellos,” Zel said, turning back to the priest. An almost imperceptible change colored his tone. “I want you to answer honestly. Were those papers you burned really useless to me?”

He was radiating hostility now. Not good. If Xellos wasn’t careful...

“Naturally.” Despite my fears, Xellos said exactly the right thing. “Think of it this way: even a recipe for the most delicious juice cocktail won’t tell you how to extract only the orange juice from the final product.”

Zel stared directly into Xellos’s eyes for a time. He then finally said with a small smirk, “Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll accept that—for now. So, what are you doing here?”

“That’s... a secret,” Xellos proclaimed with his usual pose, finger outstretched.

“He said he wants to travel with us. Or with Lina, more specifically,” Amelia added helpfully.

“What?!” Zel and Gourry shouted in perfect sync.

“Hey, hey... Are you crazy?!”

“Yeah... I can’t say I recommend it.”

“Agreed. I’m not obligated to warn you, but I will anyway: Don’t do this.”

“He’s right. Why throw your life away?”

Seriously... what is with you guys?

“There’s just one problem,” I said after we’d all gotten breakfast and everyone had come to accept that Xellos was sticking around. No matter how they tried to dissuade and discourage him, he replied with calm insistence that he’d be coming with us—even though he wouldn’t say why. In the end, Gourry and Zel both gave up.

“Whazzat?” Gourry asked while munching on a bacon and veggie sandwich.

I hesitated a moment before I replied, “Well... I slipped out last night, actually...”

“More bandit bullying?” he asked in exasperation, and I nodded meekly.

“Do you really enjoy rolling around in trash like that?” Zel inquired.

“Yes. Lots,” I answered without hesitation, to which he had no response. “Anyway, Amelia ended up tagging along. And on our way back from busting up the local bandits... we got a little visit.”

“From Xellos, you mean?” Gourry asked.

“Xellos too, but...” I waited a long minute. “I meant Zuma.”

“Say whaaat?!” Gourry and Zel exclaimed in the same breath.

Hey, wouldja look at that! Gourry actually remembered a name for once! It seemed Zel had heard of him too.

“Zuma... *That* Zuma?!” Gourry asked.

“The very one,” I responded.

“But... what about his arms?”

“All present and accounted for.”

“I see... he’s got two arms...” Gourry said to no one in particular, mussing his own hair.

Ignoring him, I continued, “Yeah, so, he fled the scene when Xellos arrived... but he said something before he left: ‘Come to Vezendi. If you don’t, someone will die.’”

“We *have* to go!” It was Amelia—go figure—who rose to her feet, fists clenched. “If we don’t, he’s going to murder an

innocent because of us!”

“H-Hey, Amelia! Keep it down, will you?! People are staring!”

I’m not sure if she heard me or not, but she continued on regardless: “We can’t abide such terrorism! We’re the only ones in the world who can stop him!”

“I know that, Amelia! We’re going, so calm down already! Gourry! Zel! Xellos! Don’t just sit there, get her back in her seat already!”

And so our group set a course for Vezendi.

Vezendi was a sizable city on the west side of Kalmaart. It sat on the intersection of roads that stretched one way to Ralteague and the other to Dils. As such, it had prospered for ages as a trading hotspot.

“I’m not feeling great about this...” Zelgadis groaned the moment the city came into view.

“What’s the problem?” I asked without stopping.

We were currently on the main thoroughfare that led into the city, and we could already see the buildings of Vezendi on the other side of the hill. We’d reached a particularly well-tended stretch of road, with people and carriages headed in both directions around us. Zel, naturally, had his face hidden beneath his hood and scarf.

“I told you before,” he said. “I’ve done some awful things in my time. I have no business waltzing into a big city.”

Ah, of course...

“You’ll be fine!” Amelia declared (baselessly, per usual). “As long as you carry justice in your heart, the world’s your oyster!”

“Untrue,” Zel denied readily, and she fell glumly silent.

“Hey, don’t be so sensitive,” chimed in Gourry. “Just keep your face covered like you’re doing now, and no one’ll notice. If I passed you on a busy city street like that, I wouldn’t even blink.”

You’re the only one who wouldn’t... Didn’t anyone here

understand basic persuasion? Or vocabulary, for that matter?! Unsure how to respond to our idiot companions (I feel you, man), Zelgadis fell silent, his brow furrowed.

"You could always stay outside the city," Xellos offered unsympathetically.

"Seriously, man?!"

"But if you think you'd be better off with Miss Lina and the others, I'm sure it's safe to go in. I don't know what kind of infamy your name carries, but there are surely inns here that will provide lodging in exchange for suitable compensation. But of course, the choice is yours."

Zel snorted lightly in response... Smirking, I imagined.

"You're right," he said. "Completely right. Fine, I'll go in."

"I'm so glad you came around!" Amelia declared, nodding in satisfaction.

No thanks to you...

I thought I could hear murmuring among the crowds coming and going along on the road. We were almost inside Vezendi City now. There was a girl selling flowers, a gent running a stall, a young man walking by... and they all seemed to be staring at us.

"Are we the center of attention, or is it just me?" Amelia muttered.

"I'd say you're spot on there, yeah," Zelgadis whispered with a nod, caution in his voice.

Gourry and Xellos, however, strode forward unconcerned. Granted, it was probably more accurate to say Gourry simply wasn't paying any attention.



Anyway, we walked a bit farther until...

"Hey." A boy of twelve or thirteen, still young enough that his voice hadn't changed yet, called out to me. He seemed like your typical rascal, right about the age that makes you want to push 'em over for no particular reason.

"What is it?" I stopped and asked him.

He stared at me for a while, then asked curtly, "Are you Lina Inverse?"

This was followed by another wave of murmurs... People were talking all around us again.

What the heck? I'd had my name on a wanted poster before (just some jerk holding a grudge, if you're curious), and this was starting to give me déjà vu. Was it possible...

"I am," I responded, still on high alert.

At that, clear commotion broke out in the crowd. What in the world?! Everyone was gawking now!

"I knew it! I wasn't sure on account of you got one extra person in your group..." The boy kept jabbering on, despite my growing unease.

Wait a second... If someone'd put out wanted posters for us again, there's no way a kid would come up to me on the street like this.

While I was trying to make heads or tails of the situation, the rubbernecks continued to flock around us.

"So, lady, I gotta ask—"

"Hang on, kid." Before the boy even finished, a sleazy-looking man stepped out of the crowd. Didn't seem particularly tough, thankfully. "I'm the one who saw her first."

"Ridiculous!" shouted an old lady next. She was on the plump side, and dressed in flashy pink clothing that didn't suit her at all. "I saw her before you did!"

And following that...

"Hey, I spotted her before you!"

"No, I did!"

"I did!"

More and more voices joined the clamoring.

"Wait! Hey! What's going on here?!" I found myself asking, but no one was listening. "Hello? Anyone?!"

"It was me!"

"No, I was first!"

Grr...

"I saw them two lengths back!"

"I saw them from the city entrance—"

"Burst Rondo!"

Vruumbldmbldrrr!

Boy, that spell silenced the crowd but good! You could hear a pin drop now. Burst Rondo is great for shutting people up, by the way... It's flashy, but not particularly powerful.

Well, okay, so *maybe* it had left the sleazy dude in a charred, twitching heap... but I was betting no one would notice if I didn't point it out. Probably.

"So?" I looked out over the throng of people, hands on my hips. They stepped back en masse. "What do you want with us? What's all the fighting about?"

Crickets.

"Well... see..." said a timid voice at last. It was the boy who'd first approached me. His eyes were full of fear now, and he made sure to keep his distance this time. "Th-The truth is... Master Laddock said he'd reward whoever brought him Lina Inverse..."

There, he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and nervously handed it to me. And just like he'd said, it promised a monetary reward for whoever delivered Lina Inverse and her companions to the specified address. The amount itself wasn't especially impressive, but it was probably a tempting sum for your average peasant.

Below the offer were a few sentences describing me, Gourry, Amelia, and Zel. Sort of, anyway. Real "broadest terms possible" type stuff. The only thing it said about Zelgadis, for instance, was that he was a "tall male dressed in white." There was also no mention, of course, of Xellos,

who had only just joined our party two days ago.

Now, when I got to reading *my* description...

"Let's go." I crumpled the paper up into a ball as I gave the order, my voice steely. "Show me the way, kid. Take me to this Laddock fellow."

The boy nodded firmly in response, fear still glinting in his eyes.

"C'mon, guys, let's go pay him a visit!" I said. I turned back to the group... and was promptly struck dumb.

My so-called teammates were huddled behind a far-off tree, only leaning out to occasionally sneak a glance. They'd probably run for cover when I unleashed my spell.

Don't pretend like we're not together, you guys!

"This is the place," the boy announced as we arrived at a mansion.

It was grand enough that even Gourry couldn't help but let out a noise of surprise. On top of that, it didn't have one shred of that "nouveau riche" feel you usually saw in places like this. Apparently the guy had taste to go with his money. I wondered if he had a lot of friends who badmouthed him behind his back too...

On the way here, the boy had explained to us that the mansion's owner, Laddock Lanzard, was one of the city's leading merchants. The story went that, about ten years ago, his father had been known as the city's *greatest* merchant. Your typical "second generation can't quite cut the mustard" situation, I guess.

"I'll take my leave here," Zelgadis said just as we approached the gate.

"Wait, Zel—"

"Think about it," he said, interrupting me. "If I go in and they offer us food and drink, I'll have to take off my scarf. I'd like to avoid showing my face as much as possible."

Okay, that's fair...

"Right. Then go find yourself an inn somewhere. After

we're finished inside, we'll make our exit and meet back up with you here. That work?"

"Sure," he agreed, then turned to leave.

"All right! Onward!" I announced.

"Right!" The boy nodded in response and called out to the gatekeeper. "I brought that Lina lady to see Mr. Laddock!"

Our group was then shown inside. The boy received his reward from the gatekeeper and ran off looking very pleased indeed.

Once inside, we were escorted to a place a bit like a drawing room, where we were left waiting for a while—make that a *long* while—without so much as an offer of tea.

Eventually, the door opened and an old man entered.

"Master Laddock shall soon arrive," he declared right before I could complain about our treatment, then took his place in a corner of the room and eyed our group carefully. He was most likely the guy's butler... Not sure if I would've called his hair silver or white, but the old gent wore it neatly slicked back.

"If he doesn't want to talk to us, we can just leave..."

"Presenting Master Laddock," the butler announced as he opened the door again, ignoring me completely.

"So you're Lina Inverse, are you?!"

The man who entered with a combative air was presumably the master of the house, Laddock Lanzard. He looked just over forty, his hair black with a single streak of white. He was on the handsome side, slender for his age, and gripping a piece of paper in his right hand like his life depended on it. A young man trailed in behind him. He appeared to be about twenty, give or take. He was attractive, had black hair, and looked a lot like the middle-aged man who'd entered first... The guy's son, maybe?

The older man walked straight up to us and—*Wham!*—slammed the paper he was clutching onto the table.

"I am Laddock Lanzard!" He spoke with a tone that

bordered on loathing as he sat down in an open chair. He then slid the paper closer to me and demanded, "Now explain this!"

"What are you talking about?"

Annoyed, I picked up the sheet and promptly fell silent as I ran my eyes across the words: *Laddock Lazard. I am going to kill you. If you don't want to die, hire Lina Inverse. -Zuma.* At the bottom was a description of our group, Xellos excepted.

"Even I have heard of Zuma the assassin," Laddock said. "Judging from this note, he's using me as bait to get you here! I certainly hope you have an explanation!"

Ugh. Talk about a domineering jerk...

"I've fought him before," I said, tossing the paper back onto the table. "He was hired to kill me, but never finished the job. Guess he's still after me."

"You *guess*?!" Laddock screamed, pounding the table. "This is outrageous! Your recklessness has put *my* life in danger, so it's up to *you* to stop this!" he declared as if it was an inarguable fact.

You old asshole! Fine, if that's the attitude you're gonna take...

I stood up and said in as icy a voice as I could muster, "I'm not obligated to help you. Let's get out of here, guys."

"What?!" Laddock howled, his face purpling with anger.

"Hang on a minute, Lina!"

"That's a little harsh..."

"Think about it!" I cut off Gourry and Amelia's protests, and pointed back at Laddock. "Why would an assassin send *you* that threat?"

"Well... obviously, because he knew it was within my means to find you!"

"Are you sure about that?"

"What are you insinuating?!"

"It's true you're one of the city's wealthiest men, and sure, you had the resources to track me down. I'll even admit

that the reward you offered is ultimately what brought us here! But if all Zuma's after is *me*... why didn't he send the threat to the *richest* man in town?"

Laddock blustered for a moment. "How should I know?!" he said contemptuously.

"Here's my theory: *he's after you too*."

"Huh?" he uttered dumbly.

"Zuma's a pain in the ass, but he's a pro—both in skill and in attitude. He doesn't go around taking innocent people hostage. In other words, someone else has hired him to kill *you*, and he's decided to use the opportunity to lure me in too. And once we're together, he intends to take out two birds with one stone."

"Wait a minute!" Laddock shrieked as he caught on to my logic. "You mean... even with you guarding me, he's still going to kill me?!"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "If I'm guarding you, he'll come for me first. If he kills *you* first, see, I'll be free to run off. In other words, he won't touch you until I'm dead. That is... assuming I agree to guard you in the first place."

"You have to!"

"Reality check, man. I know you think you're the most important man alive, but putting my life on the line to save a world-class dick falls outside the realm of things I'd consider doing out of the kindness of my heart. You follow?" I pressed him.

He was silent for a while, and then finally...

"Fine..." he whispered angrily. "I shall officially hire you to be my bodyguard, with pay. Is that acceptable?"

"Now you're talking," I replied.

Of course, I would've taken the job pro bono if the guy hadn't been such a jerk, and if the flyer he'd sent around town hadn't referred to me as "flat-chested." I mean, he was probably just repeating what was written in Zuma's letter, but still!

Curse you, Zuma! You'll pay for this!

I glanced at the butler who still stood silently behind Laddock, then at the young man who hadn't said a word this entire time. The latter was just slumped against the wall watching our conversation sourly.

"By the way, who're they?" I asked.

"My butler Raltark, and my son Abel. Actually... one of your group has changed, no?"

"Oh. Yeah, stuff happened. This is Xellos, just your friendly neighborhood mysterious priest," I said, introducing the man. Xellos gave him a small, cheerful nod on cue. "You'll probably be fine as long as you don't provoke him."

"Not an especially reassuring introduction..." Laddock grimaced. "But, ah well. Starting today, you'll be my live-in security."

"Yeah, I guess that's what it comes down to..."

By the time I'd gotten Zel up to speed, the sky outside the window was darkening.

We were currently in the slums of Vezendi, a truly seedy part of the city where Zelgadis had managed to secure himself a room. The walls, ceiling, and lamps were all dingy, and the floors squeaked beneath every step. Even for a single occupancy, the place was cramped. It took some work to squeeze in me, Gourry, Zel, and Amelia all together.

This was apparently the kind of place Xellos had mentioned that would "put you up in exchange for suitable compensation," except that "suitable compensation" clearly meant "an absolute ripoff." They were charging Zel close to double what a regular inn would ask for a room twice as nice.

Anyhoo, enough about the accommodations.

After we'd finished negotiating our price with Laddock, the lot of us—sans Xellos—left the mansion to report to Zel. We found him already waiting for us outside. We offered to let him in on the bodyguarding gig, but he said that staying at Laddock's would just mean exposing his face eventually.

So we then proceeded back here to his room to talk more.

"But are you sure about this?" Zel muttered as I finished my tale.

"Sure about what?"

"This Laddock guy... He's your client now, right? Can you really afford to leave him alone while you catch me up?"

"Oh, don't worry about that." I waved my hand dismissively. "I'm sure Zuma'll come for me first, and I left Xellos at the guy's house to play guard dog just in case. Besides, I needed to know where you're staying in case I need to get in touch with you later."

"Fair enough," Zel whispered thoughtfully.

"That said, I guess it is about time to head back," I announced, rising from the rock-hard bed I'd been sitting on. "Laddock'll lose his mind if we're gone too long."

"You're right about that," Gourry said, standing up from the wall he was leaning against. "And most importantly... it's almost dinnertime."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up there," I said with a laugh as I opened the door. "I don't think he likes us very much. He'll probably stick us at the end of a sumptuously lined banquet table and serve us seven courses of gruel."

I then stepped out into the hall and—

"What's wrong, Lina?" Amelia asked from behind me.

"Dunno..." I responded vaguely.

I was struck with a strange feeling for a second... Had it just been my imagination? Gourry and Amelia followed me out into the hall. Zel followed suit, pulling his scarf up and his hood down.

"Seeing us out?" I asked.

"Going downstairs for dinner," he replied.

Of course. Inns like this always served food and drink on the first floor. I felt bad for Zel, though. I couldn't imagine the fare was any good here...

"That's too bad. I'd feel a lot more confident with you around, Zel..." I said back to him as I walked down the dark,

empty hallway. "Hey, I know! You got a flute or something?"

"A flute?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. Something I could just blow to summon you. Y'know, like where you'd come running to bail us out in a pinch. That kind of thing."

"Hang on a minute. Do you really think of me as some kind of magical item at your beck and call?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Hahh..." Zelgadis let out a deep, heavy sigh, then put a hand on Gourry's shoulder. "How do you do it? How do you travel with her?"

"Well, I *am* a patient man."

That wasn't flattery, Gourry!



The banter continued as we made our way downstairs... where we all froze up in unison. The first floor was dimly lit, and it didn't look especially clean. There were simple wooden tables lined up through the room.

That much was fine... But why was it totally deserted?!

"What's going on here?" Gourry whispered.

"That would be the doing of our barrier," responded an unfamiliar female voice.

Across the room, in the thick of the shadows, I saw something white hovering in the air, roughly at eye level. Long, disheveled black hair coiled around it like darkness incarnate. The woman(?) was slightly hunchbacked and dressed in a black robe. As she stepped forward, I could see that her face had the deathly pallor of a drowning victim. Moreover, that she had no eyes or nose—just a red mouth carved into a smile.

"A demon?!" Amelia squeaked.

"Call me Guduza..." it responded in an old woman's voice. "And the one atop the stairs is Duguld."

I found myself looking back at the staircase we'd just descended. At the apex stood a dark figure in a black cape of a curious design. He also wore a black, brimmed hat in some strange parody of style. His head looked like a hard, black egg with no face and no hair.

He seemed to notice my gaze and tipped his hat with the smallest motion of his right hand. Iffy fashion sense aside, I doubted this character was one we could take lightly.

"And? What do you demons want with us?" I asked, turning back to Guduza.

"They're helping me," said a third voice from the front door to the inn—but this one was familiar.

It can't be...

The door swung open with a long, stuttering creak.

"They're old friends of mine."

He stood there silently, silhouetted by the red twilight sky behind him, his cape fluttering in the wind. His design had

changed since the last time we saw him, but beneath the turban that crowned his head was the same white devil's mask.

Seigram!

2: The Battle Starts in Vezendi

Yes... Standing in the doorway was none other than Seigram, a demon we'd previously thrown down with. We'd managed to beat him at the time, but he'd slipped away before we could finish him off for good. I was unhappy enough about Zuma showing up again, and if this guy was back in business too...

"It's been a while," Seigram said as he approached with a smooth stride. "You're looking well... unfortunately for me."

He'd been powerful enough to tank a strike from Gourry's demon-slaying Sword of Light last time, though I was sure it hurt him pretty good. I'd assumed it would take him a lot longer than this to revive, actually... Guess he was tougher than I thought. We'd since powered up ourselves, however, so if Seigram wasn't completely recovered, we'd have this in the bag... Okay, maybe not *technically* in the bag, but our odds were way better.

"I came back to repay the debt I owe you," he said quietly.

"And brought a few friends along for the ride?" I jeered.

"We're his assistants, in a sense," came a voice from atop the stairs. It was the stylish demon, Duguld. While fiddling with his hat with his right hand, he continued, "He wants to beat you and that blond man himself while Guduza and I polish off the leftovers."

"Oh?" Zel's eyebrow twitched. "You'll pay for that slight, you bottom-ranked demon."

"Hold your temper, you wretched chimera."

Uh-oh! Talk about touching a nerve!

"What was that?" Zel growled, radiating hostility. "Say it again."

"I told you to hold your temper, *child*."

Boy, the sparks were flying now...

"Sounds like I'm fighting you, then!" Amelia announced, pointing boldly at the remaining demon in the back of the room, Guduza.

"Heh, the agonies of a dying human... I haven't feasted upon them for some time." With those eerie words, the corners of Guduza's red lips curled upward.

"Then it's all settled," Seigram said, slowly spreading his hands. "Let us begin."

Magical light appeared in his palms, signaling the start of the deathmatch inside the demons' barrier dimension!

With a hiss, Duguld jumped forward. He was coming straight down the stairs at Zel!

Zel drew the broadsword from his back and quietly began to chant a spell. His blade was a fine one, but it was still mundane. Against demons—fundamentally astral beings—it wouldn't even scare them, much less harm them. Zel must have known that too, and yet...

"Let's go!"

Cape flapping behind him as he descended, Duguld thrust out his right hand. A dozen tiny bullets of darkness shot from his fingertips at Zel.

Zel quickly leaped back. *Pop-pop-pop!* The dark bullets bore small holes in the wooden floor around Zel's feet with the ease of a hot knife through butter. But no sooner had they made contact than Zel finished his chant and activated the words of power.

"Astral Vine!" he incanted, the blade of the broadsword in his hand beginning to glow faintly red.

Is that...?!

"What?!" Duguld cried and quickly changed course midair.

Zel leaped, kicking off the floor to meet the airborne demon, then lashed out with an upward slice from his broadsword!

Thunk! Both fighters landed at the exact same moment.

“Not bad at all. At the very least, better than I expected,” Duguld said quietly.

All the sword had done was cut a deep gash through his cape, though I was pretty sure a demon’s clothing was still a part of their body. And when the faceless demon flipped his cape back, indeed, it was perfectly mended.

“I take back what I said about you being ‘leftovers.’ I see... Infusing a normal sword with magic? I’ve never seen such a trick,” he continued.

Yeah, I dunno when or where Zel had learned that, but Duguld was right. The spell he’d cast imbued his sword with magic, functionally turning it into an intermediary for striking an opponent with magic directly. I didn’t know how powerful it really was, but the evidence so far was compelling.

“Now... I suppose I’ll have to take you seriously,” Duguld said as a dozen new dark bullets appeared in the air around him.

“Let’s go!” Amelia cried, dashing straight for Guduza while quietly chanting a spell.

Charging in unarmed? Girl, are you crazy?!

The demon chuckled, “Coming to me, are you?” Her hair rustled around her as she moved to meet Amelia.

Amelia finished her chant, and as she did, Guduza’s shadow on the floor stretched toward her. Amelia tried to avoid it, but she was a little too late. The shadow reached her leg...

Thunk.

“?!”

With a silent cry, Amelia struggled for a minute only to realize she was held fast in place. It was the doing of Guduza’s shadow. Probably some way of binding from the astral plane, similar to a Shadow Snap.

“Pathetic... Now, I’ll tear you to shreds.” Guduza closed in on Amelia immediately, her black hair rustling...

“Elemekia Lance!”

Amelia let that sucker fly! Elemekia Lance damaged an opponent’s spirit directly, which would affect even demons, but...

“Fool,” the demon whispered, sidestepping the blast altogether.

Not good! Amelia wouldn’t have time to chant another spell! Yet as the magical javelin she’d unleashed passed right by its target...

“Break!” Amelia shouted.

Huh?!

The Elemekia Lance burst into pieces next to Guduza!

“What?!” Doused with the magical fragments, Guduza let out a scream of surprise and leaped back. It must have broken her concentration, because the shadow on the floor disappeared, and Amelia was freed.

What Amelia had done was take an Elemekia Lance—a simple spell you usually just launched in a straight line—and tweak it to explode on command. Little alterations like that were possible if you had a deep enough understanding of a spell’s chant.

Of course, breaking it up in that fashion weakened it compared to normal... The blast probably felt no worse than a slightly-too-hot shower to Guduza. It was only surprise that had driven her back.

“Hmm... you think highly of yourself for a mere human child!” Guduza hissed, her words seething with loathing.

But Amelia was already chanting her next spell. Guduza smoothly closed the distance between them to try again.

Last but not least, Gourry and I were locked in a battle of our own. It started around the same time Duguld was jumping down the stairs and Amelia was dashing across the room...

“Eek!” I yelped.

The two magical lights that had manifested in Seigram’s

hands streaked toward us. I began chanting a spell as I leaped to the side to escape, and Gourry... He just charged straight for them!

"Light, come forth!" he roared, seconds before making contact.

A brilliant beam of light appeared from the bladeless hilt in his hands—this was the demon-slaying Sword of Light, which channeled its bearer's will in weapon form.

"Hahh!" With a shout, Gourry slashed at the incoming magical lights! *Zing! Vrrring!* With ear-splitting peals, they were both harmlessly dispelled. Meanwhile, Gourry continued to charge at the demon who'd fired them.

It was about then that I finished the chant for my own Elemekia Lance... But it was too soon to use it. I recalled Seigram had the power to manipulate darkness and blink through space. If I unleashed my spell now, he could easily dodge both it and Gourry's attack at the same time. I needed to wait for Gourry to attack first, then unleash my spell when Seigram reappeared.

So I watched as Gourry swung the Sword of Light, and Seigram... jumped?! Counter to my expectations, Seigram just leaped into the air to avoid Gourry's attack. Near simultaneously, he manifested two more spheres of magic light in his hands... and chucked them at Gourry below!

"Wugh?!" Gourry quickly moved to cut them both down. No sooner had he done so than Seigram landed right next to the big lug. Before he could even pull his sword back to defend... "Gah!"

Seigram had planted a kick right into his stomach.

Holy crap, this demon's fast!

Gourry went flying backward. I took the opportunity to fire the Elemekia Lance I had on tap at Seigram. But the white-masked demon, seeming perfectly unconcerned, knocked it out of the air with more magical light manifested from his left hand.

"Ugh... ghk..." Gourry groaned, getting back on his feet

across the room. Seemed he'd leaped back with the kick to dull its impact.

"Are you even taking this seriously?" Seigram asked, his tone perfectly unaffected. "If so... you've grown weaker."

This was bad news. Not only was Seigram fully recovered, he was actually stronger than the last time we'd tussled...

"Come at me, child!" Duguld shouted mockingly.

"As you wish!" Zelgadis cried in turn, rushing the guy.

"One!" Duguld shouted with a backward leap.

At his call, the dark bullets that wreathed him shot toward Zel, who easily batted them away with his magic-infused broadsword.

"Oho?! Well, then... two!"

Another round of bullets, these with slightly different timing and trajectories, homed in on Zelgadis, but he scattered them as well.

"And... three!"

The third wave too met the same fate. Duguld now had his back against the wall. He had nowhere left to run. And before he could make his next move, Zel finished the spell he was chanting.

"Goz Vu Row!"

A black shadow appeared on the floor and raced toward the demon. If it hit him, it would target his astral form, but...

"Not bad at all!" he remarked, sending his remaining dark bullets raining down on the approaching Goz Vu Row.

Ker-crack! Black plasma sizzled and both spells disappeared—but Zelgadis kept charging! Duguld had nothing left to protect him now. Zel raised his broadsword high, and...

Vrrrz! With a sound like insect wings, Duguld's body dissolved into the wall behind him!

"What?!" Zel exclaimed in shock.

Zunk! What should have been his killing blow sunk harmlessly into the wall instead.

“That was close... You nearly killed me,” called a languid voice from right behind Zel.

He dislodged his sword and turned around quickly to see Duguld rising up from the floor. I don’t know if that was a perk of the barrier dimension or a special ability of Duguld’s, but either way, the guy was clearly quite a trickster.

“Impressive that you can use your enchanted sword and your spells at the same time,” he said, tilting the brim of his hat ever so slightly. A swarm of dark bullets appeared around him once more. “In fact... I may need to put forth some real effort.”

“Shut up!” Zelgadis shouted, breaking into a charge again.

It looked like Duguld was going to hold his ground this time and simply shower Zel with dark bullets en masse. Zelgadis, however, clicked his tongue and charged regardless. He knocked away most of the flying bullets, but...

“Geh!”

He missed one, which nailed him in the left shoulder. A second shot then grazed his right leg.

“Tch!”

He didn’t let it stop his charge. Dragging his leg, he kept running and—*Krrsh!*—ran his broadsword right through Duguld.

“Gwaaah!” the demon wailed.

“Graaah!”

The howling Guduza cleared the distance to Amelia in the blink of an eye. *Vwoosh!* The demon’s long, black hair began to streak toward her, yet Amelia dashed forward again nonetheless. She was in the demon’s face in a flash. She thrust her left hand forward... but Guduza’s hair tangled around it!

Snap! A dull crack rang out. Guduza’s smile widened. But without so much as a cry, Amelia drove her other fist straight into the demon’s stomach.

“Elemekia Lance!” she then incanted, unleashing a spell simultaneously.

“Gwuh?!” The demon shouted and leaped back, naturally releasing Amelia in the process. “How... How dare you!” Guduza hissed, her voice rife with agony and hatred.

A blow like that obviously wasn’t enough to end a demon, though it did seem to hurt her good. The exchange, however, had also left Amelia with a broken hand.

“Are you mad, child?! Sacrificing your own left hand...”

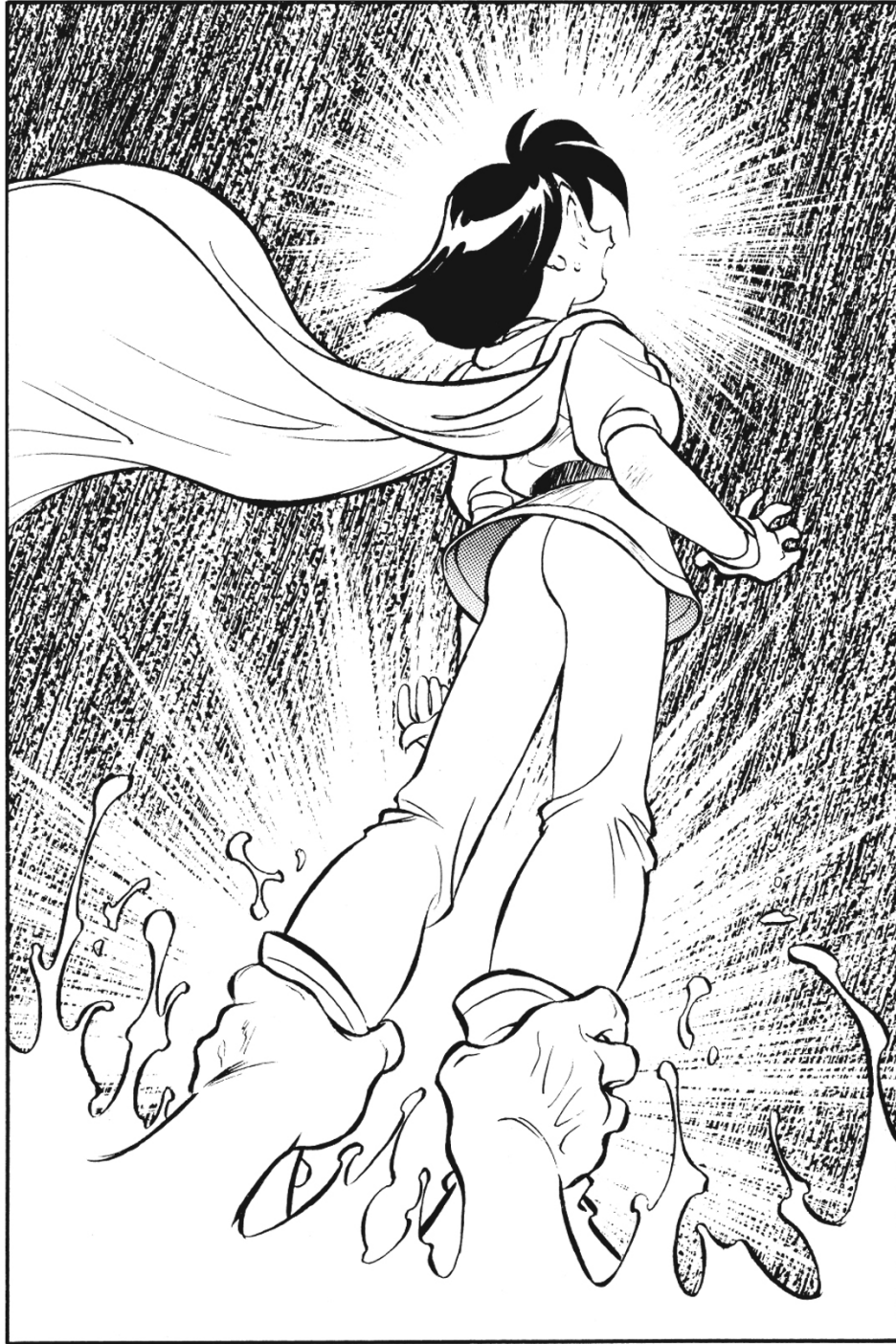
“It’s the only way to win!” Amelia declared, undaunted.

She was clearly in pain, mind you. The fine veneer of sweat on her face proved as much.

“I see... I was mistaken,” Guduza whispered to herself as Amelia began chanting. “I was hoping to beat you to death while feasting on your fear and anguish... but it seems I can’t afford to take it easy with you...”

And as she spoke, Guduza touched her shadow on the floor. *Burble...* Her hands melted into it up to her wrists.

Just then, Amelia shuddered. Guduza’s hands had emerged from Amelia’s shadow behind her and were grabbing her ankles tight! Nevertheless, she continued chanting her spell without interruption.



“Heh heh... I’ll tear you to pieces,” Guduza whispered.

Her black hair began to grow, dancing and writhing like so many slender snakes. It hit the floor, slithered into her shadow, and then slowly crawled up out of Amelia’s. It wound around her feet, slinking upward... then suddenly stopped.

“You brat! That incantation...” Guduza gasped, at last seeming to realize what Amelia was chanting.

Good ol’ Ra Tilt, the strongest attack spell in all shamanistic magic. It was single-target only, but it dealt astral damage powerful enough to kill a demon like Guduza in one hit. Dodging it wouldn’t be easy.

Guduza hesitated for just a second. She seemed to be weighing whether or not her hair could kill Amelia before Amelia finished her incantation. She finally seemed to realize it couldn’t...

“Tch!”

Her hands and hair released Amelia, withdrawing into the shadow whence they came. Her white face suddenly dimmed, darkening to the same color as her body. Was she trying to run away?

Good thing Amelia was faster!

“Ra Tilt!”

With that—*Vwoosh!*—a blue pillar of fire consumed the demon and disintegrated her body without even giving her a chance to scream.

“My bad,” Gourry said as he readied the Sword of Light with an intrepid smile. “Looks like you’ve changed up your attack patterns since the last time we fought. You kinda caught me off guard.”

Hey, uh, Gourry! Don’t go telling him stuff like that!

If we were out in the middle of a field, I might be able to get some distance and smash Seigram with a Dragon Slave. But Gourry and the others were nearby, not to mention the fact that we were in the city. It was clear this was a pocket

dimension of some kind, but I didn't know its exact properties, so I had no idea if unleashing a Dragon Slave here would affect the outside world or not. That limited my options pretty severely.

I decided I'd just have to provide assistance from the sidelines with minor spells, being as careful as I could not to hit Gourry with any friendly fire. So without much other choice, I began prepping another Elemekia Lance.

As I did, Gourry dashed forward. At the same time, Seigram stepped smoothly toward him...

Gourry was right—Seigram *had* changed up his moves. The last we fought, he always waited for his opponent to come to him before blinking away at the last second and retaliating from an unexpected location.

Could this mean...

An idea suddenly crossed my mind. What if Seigram wasn't completely recovered after all? What if he wasn't using his blinking ability because he *couldn't*?

While I was contemplating that, Gourry and Seigram collided. Gourry let out a battlecry as he brought down a diagonal slash... that Seigram couldn't dodge!

Crackle! The Sword of Light came to a halt, scattering magic or light or something (not really sure). Seigram had blocked the blade with another orb he'd conjured in his right hand! He then quickly followed up by throwing his right leg out at Gourry's stomach.

"Tch!" Gourry used his own leg to block the demon's kick.

Seigram moved lithely, retracting his arm and leg and retreating a step back. Gourry lashed out with a fierce overhead slash, and Seigram charged forward like he was waiting for just that. He thrust his left palm at Gourry, another magical light appearing within it!

Gourry swung the Sword of Light upward at the demon's extended left arm. But, seeming to anticipate this maneuver, Seigram pitched forward and slammed the magic sphere in his right hand down upon the blade. His left hand

then shot toward Gourry and...

Bwoosh! The magical light in his left palm went out when my Elemekia Lance struck it.

Gourry and Seigram leaped back simultaneously.

To be honest, I'd meant to nail Seigram... but keeping up with their back-and-forth was hard, so I'd missed the mark a bit. Granted, that was better than getting Gourry, I guess.

Still, Seigram's movements were decidedly faster than the last time we'd tangled. It was hard to believe he was giving Gourry as good as he got in close-quarters combat. To be honest, I wasn't sure what more I could do...

Of late, I'd actually been managing to follow Gourry's attacks an eensy smidge—probably the result of hanging out with him for so long—but that didn't mean I could predict them. One wrong move and I'd end up blasting his head off or something.

Slowly but surely, Gourry and Seigram closed the distance between each other again.

Duguld's scream lingered even as it faded. Zel smiled slightly. But...

"Just kidding," the skewered demon suddenly said jauntily.

Zel's eyes went wide with shock moments before a magical blast erupted loudly between the two of them. Denied the chance to react, Zelgadis was blown back and—*Crash!*—sent flying into a nearby table.

"Very careless of you, child," Duguld said, tipping his hat in the direction of the laid-out Zel. Zel's broadsword was still sticking out of his stomach. "You didn't even notice? My bullets robbed your blade of the magic you infused into it. A mundane hunk of steel can't harm me—even like this."

There, the demon unceremoniously removed the broadsword from his stomach, tossed it aside disinterestedly, then turned and sauntered toward where Guduza and Amelia were fighting.

"I... I see," Zel managed with a twitch.

Duguld stopped mid-step. "Oho," he whispered in amusement, glancing over his shoulder.

Zel had just gotten to his feet, and was now picking up his broadsword. He seemed worse for wear, however. His legs were trembling.

"You're right... I was careless," he said, a smile nevertheless reappearing on his face as he readied his sword again.

"I see..." Duguld turned back. "I was careless too, child. I underestimated your strength. Had you been a mere human, that blow would have killed you. I hadn't taken your... enhancements... into account. I won't hold anything back now."

For a third time, Duguld was swarmed with a shroud of dark bullets.

When the blue pillar of flame died down at last, Guduza was gone. Amelia let out a little sigh. But as she did...

Wham! A magical shockwave hit her head-on!

"Gwuh?!"

The blast threw her into a wall, where she then collapsed to the floor. As for the spell, it had come from... Guduza?! Her stark white face was hovering at just about eye level, no body attached.

"Hmm, hmm... That looked like it hurt," Guduza mused as darkness radiated outward from her face. In seconds, it came to form her hair and her body once more.

"Ngh... hng..." Amelia let out a low whine, looking over at Guduza from where she lay on the ground.

"That spell could have killed me... but we demons can easily evade the meager spells you humans use. I left only an empty astral shell for a decoy, and you fell for it." Guduza slowly approached Amelia, her hair rustling as she moved.

"Now... I suppose I'll go about killing you."

Guduza's crimson mouth twisted into a smile.

Gourry and Seigram were still locked in combat.

I was keeping tabs on Zelgadis and Amelia as the situation allowed, but I can't say things were looking good. Zel was still bleeding from a bullet hole in his left shoulder, while Amelia was crumpled on the floor.

What should I do? Go help Amelia and Zel? But what would that really do for us? Should I bust the barrier, then? No, how would that help?

All the barrier was doing was keeping us walled off from the real world. There was no miasma here, so it wasn't powering the demons up any. They didn't seem to be using it against us, either. So if I broke us out of the barrier and into the real world, all I'd be doing was dragging innocent people into our conflict.

Wait a minute...

Something finally hit me. If that was the case, why had the demons bothered to erect the barrier in the first place? I'd fought another demon once who, for some reason, refused to get bystanders involved. Was that what was happening here? If so, busting the barrier would actually work in our favor.

I decided to chuck the Elemekia Lance I'd already chanted at Guduza. I was hoping to catch her in a blind spot...

"Eh?!" But she simply let out a little cry, dodged my spell, and turned toward me.

Oh, right! Guess you don't have blind spots when you don't have eyes!

Regardless, while I had the demon's attention, I started my amplification chant. The talismans on my neck, my belt buckle, and both wrists began to emit a faint light.

"Demon Blood?!" Guduza cried in shock.

I'd bought these puppies off of Xellos a while back, and they had the shocking power to enhance a caster's magic capacity. The required amplification chant seriously drew out

a spell's casting time, but it provided a commensurate boost in power.

"Amplification, eh? Not so fast!" Guduza howled—and charged right at me! Would my spell make it in time?!

"Don't touch her, Guduza!" It was Seigram that stopped her. "We had a deal."

"But... Seigram..."

While Guduza hesitated, I unleashed my spell!

"Flow Break!"

A six-pointed star burst with shining light that engulfed the room! And when it faded... we found ourselves amidst a buzzing crowd.

You know the types. A bunch of gruff-looking men sitting around the tables, one old guy who looked already drunk, and a middle-aged man serving food... They were all looking at us. Given their expressions, I imagine we'd popped out of thin air—demons included, obviously.

"Tch!" Seigram tutted ruefully.

Gourry wasn't about to miss such a golden opportunity. He unleashed a high slash and almost had the demon, but Seigram used another ball of magic in his right hand to block the blow. Gourry didn't stop there, however. He slipped by Seigram, pivoting with his blade where it met the magic ball, and smashed the hilt of his sword into Seigram's white mask!



Krik! I heard the sound of stone cracking.

"Gahh!" Seigram leaped back with a cry, holding his mask to his face with his right hand. "Guduza, Duguld! Retreat!"

"Ah, and just when things were getting good..."

"If you insist."

The three demons then turned and flew out the door, leaving behind a chattering, baffled tavern of people.

Of course, the rest of us stayed put. If we tried to pursue them, they'd put up a fight—and we needed to help Amelia first.

"Amelia!" I cried out as I ran over to her.

"I'm... I'm okay," she squeaked with bravado through the pain.

"Take it easy, girl," I said as I gently helped her up.

Her left hand was broken, and while she didn't have any other obvious injuries, that magical shockwave had really done a number on her.

"I'm okay... I'll cast a spell..." she whispered before beginning a chant.

It was Resurrection, the ultimate recovery spell. She must've gotten her clock cleaned good...

"How is she?" Zelgadis asked as he approached. He was looking pretty shaky himself.

"She's healing herself, but you get over here. I'll take care of your shoulder," I offered, beckoning with my free hand.

"That's all right," he replied with a shake of his head. "I can heal this on my own."

"What? You know healing magic, Zel?"

"Recovery, yeah. She taught me a while back," he said, indicating Amelia before he began reciting the chant.

"Excuse me, folks..." A man who looked like the innkeeper addressed us timidly. "What in the world is going on here? You just appeared out of nowhere... And who were those people who ran out?"

"Oh, that's, uh... Er, it's complicated, see..." All I could do

was stammer.

Me, Gourry, and Amelia returned to Laddock Lanzard's house well after sundown that night. Zel stayed behind at the seedy inn.

"Are you sure you're okay, Amelia?"

"Right as rain!" she declared with a heroic pose. Seemed she'd recovered mentally as well as physically. "She caught me by surprise with some of those nasty tricks, but the next time we meet shall be that wretched villain's last!"

Such were the conversations we shared as we walked through the gate to the Lanzard estate. And as we made our way into the house...

"My, my. You've had quite a time of it, haven't you? Hahaha."

"Not at all. Such things are all part of serving one's master."

We could hear Xellos speaking with an old man in a different room. I peeked in to find Raltark the butler having a pleasant little chat with our "friend" over a game of chess.

Grr... I felt a boiling anger bubbling up inside me. *We were out fighting for our lives, and he was playing chess?!*

"Hey! Xellos!" I found myself shouting.

"Oh! Welcome back, all," he greeted us with his usual smile.

Rrrgh...

"Don't 'welcome back, all' me! We were in serious trouble out there!"

"Oh?" He cocked his head, seemingly unbothered as he moved a piece on the board.

This guuuy...

"I do believe that's checkmate."

"Hmm... Yes, so it is. You're truly beyond me, Master Xellos," Raltark whispered sternly.

"Really, it's nothing. Hahaha."

Hahaha, my ass!

“Hey! We were fightin’ our butts off out there and you’re sittin’ in here laughing?! What the hell kind of jackass—”

“You’re in no position to criticize,” came a sudden voice from behind me.

“What was that?!” I whipped around to see Laddock’s son standing behind me in the corridor.

“I mean, honestly. My father hired you as his bodyguards, and the first thing you do is go traipsing around the city. Then you come back here and chew out a companion for trouble *you* wandered off to find? The sheer heartlessness of it!”

Urk!

For a moment, I was at a loss for words. I understood that, from Abel’s point of view, we were fully in the wrong... But Lina Inverse doesn’t take that crap from just anyone!

“Xellos doesn’t deserve human compassion!” I declared proudly.

Behind me, Gourry and Amelia pitched over. Xellos himself showed no reaction.

“Besides, I told your father out of the gate that Zuma would come for me before him! You were there when I said it! Weren’t you listening?!”

A complicated expression—a combination of fear and hesitation—flashed briefly across Abel’s face before he said, “You said you ran into trouble in the city... Was it with Zuma the assassin?”

“...No...” I thought about lying for a second, but decided to be honest.

“Aha, I knew it,” Abel said triumphantly. He then struck a pretentious pose, slicking back his hair. “Is there even *really* an assassin involved in all this?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“For starters, how do I know the letter my father received is actually from Zuma? It seems to me that some down-on-their-luck mercenaries could have pegged my father for an easy mark and decided to send a forged letter from Zuma

demanding that he hire them.”

Grr!

“Hang on a minute! That’s—”

“Wait, Lina,” Amelia interrupted me, glaring in Abel’s direction. “Are you asking us to leave?”

Abel’s eyes remained on Amelia and me as he sniffled, “I’m quite a sensitive soul, you see. Just the thought of sharing a dwelling with you ragtag mercenaries makes me sick to my stomach.”

What was that?! Grrrrr... This is why I hate rich spoiled brats!

“So, if it were up to me, I would kick you out forthwith, but—”

“Enough!” thundered Laddock’s voice, swiftly approaching from down the hall.

“Dad?!” Abel cried out in shock. “But didn’t you hear what I said?! This whole thing might be a scam!”

“And if not, what then?”

“But...!”

“Oh, shut up, Abel!”

Abel clicked his tongue and fell silent. *Nice one, man! Let him have it!* But even as I cheered Laddock on internally, he cast a sharp look my way.

“You’d better stop this nonsense, too. I can’t have you going out on your own. At least get my permission first!”

“What the...? We left a message with your butler that we were heading out and everything!”

“So I heard! But I still never authorized it!”

This duuude...

“Excuse me, but as I explained earlier, Zuma—”

“Will attack you first, right? I know that! My point is this: Whatever the facts may be, at least superficially, I am paying you people money to protect me! You can’t just go leaving this mansion whenever you feel like it!” he railed, still furious.

Grrrrrrrr!

“Well, whatever! I’ll overlook it this time! Dinner’s ready, so I’ll send someone to show you the way! Let’s go, Abel!” he spat.

I didn’t even have time to snap back at him before he’d disappeared down the hall.

“What in the heck?! What is *wrong* with these people?!” I raged, slicing through my mutton steak as if it had killed my father.

A servant had shown us to a small dining room. Fortunately, Laddock and Abel were supping separately. Apparently the loathing was mutual between us, which suited me just fine, as I wasn’t eager to spend my precious mealtime looking at their stupid faces. The food itself was pretty good, though not nearly good enough to quell my anger.

We’d caught Xellos up on the situation before I’d launched into my litany of complaints. It was just the four of us in the dining hall—me, Gourry, Amelia, and Xellos. So I took the liberty to keep ranting.

“I’m not gonna remind him of the huge favor I’m doing him, but I could! How could he treat someone who agreed to protect him like this?!”

“Maybe he’s stressed out because his life is in danger?” Amelia offered sheepishly.

“I know that!” I said. “And I know that Seigram’s attack had nothing to do with Old Man Laddock or Little Brat Abel!”

“Then what does it matter?” Gourry said, unbothered as could be as he chewed on some broccoli, which was blanched just long enough that it retained its dazzling green color. “I’ll admit, the father and son don’t really seem like nice people. But complaining about that won’t change anything, will it?”

“I know that too! I’m just venting stress here!” I squawked, spearing a broccoli stalk on my fork.

“C’mon, Lina...”

"Of course, I understand what you're going through," Xellos said quietly, as he—for some reason—cut up a stewed carrot with a knife and fork. "I believe you mentioned earlier that Seigram's and Zuma's only connection here is to you and Master Gourry. Neither has anything to do with Miss Amelia or Master Zelgadis, yet your association with them has now imperiled their lives. I'm sure you feel terrible, Miss Lina, but you're too bashful to admit to it... So it's only natural that you need some other way to decompress."

Well, I see someone's got his armchair psychologist going... I cast a sidelong glance at Xellos.

"Wait a minute... you don't actually think I'm a good person, do you?!"

"Not in the slightest," he said firmly with a beaming smile.

Okay, a little harsher than I was expecting...

"But you do seem like the kind of person who likes to compartmentalize her comrades that way."

Ugh... His bluntness made it hard for me to know how to respond. It would be a little weird to get offended and deny it...

Following that, there was only the sound of clinking dinnerware for a time.

"Oh, that's right, Gourry," I eventually said, suddenly remembering an idea I'd had for a while but kept putting off.

"Hmm? What is it?" he asked while slurping down his pasta side.

"I wanted to ask... would you care to join me tonight?"

No sooner had those words left my mouth than...

"Oh, Lina! So bold!" Amelia squealed.

"My, it seems our girl's growing up," Xellos threw in.

"H-Hey! That's not how I meant it! C'mon, Gourry! Quit blushing!"

"Well, I mean... y'know..."

"I did not mean *that*! I want you to help me with my sword practice!"

“Oh, is that all?” Amelia said in disappointment.

“What a shame,” Xellos echoed.

“Still, this isn’t like you, Lina. Why do you suddenly want sword training?”

“Listen, not that I’m a huge fan of the whole ‘blood, sweat, and tears’ thing, but...” I said, scratching at my head. “I had a hard time keeping up with Zuma before, and just watching you fight from the sidelines feels like a waste. Charging in blindly is dangerous too, so...”

“Hmm... that’s true,” Xellos said absently as he cut into some chicken thigh meat. “There’s no substitute for proper training. More importantly, you really should be able to defeat someone of his caliber yourself.”

“That’s why I’m gonna try putting in a little sweat,” I responded, popping a potato fritter into my mouth.

The next day, Gourry and I headed back into town. Obviously, we got permission from Laddock this time. He wasn’t thrilled, so we ended up leaving Xellos and Amelia to babysit... but my main order of business today was buying a replacement for the pauldron that Zuma destroyed at the start of all this.

Is it just me, or have I really been burning through these puppies lately? I would’ve preferred simply to have mine repaired, but I’d bought this particular set in Saillune. There probably wasn’t anyone here with the know-how, let alone the materials, to do the job.

Vezendi was a pretty big city, but it was seriously lacking in magic shops. I wasn’t sure if that was true across the Duchy of Kalmaart or if it was unique to this area. Anyway, we talked to some locals and eventually found our way to the one and only gig in town.

“Let me see... Yes, I doubt you’ll be able to get this fixed here.”

It was a one-room magic item shop. I asked the elderly proprietor—who didn’t seem to know much about magic at

all—if she could repair my pauldron, and the answer was about what I expected. She wasn't an arcane specialist, but rather just a typical merchant.

She scrutinized the pauldron I'd handed her, however, and continued, "The blacksmiths in these parts don't deal with this kind of material. Well, there was that one time... A sorcerer like you asked to have their breastplate fixed. I turned the job to a blacksmith in town who was willing to give the repair a shot. He filled the fissure in with lead or iron or something. When the sorcerer came back, they raised a real racket. 'I can't wear this heavy thing! I'm not paying for this!' It was a right mess."

I would be mad too, yeah.

"Now, you'll probably want to replace the right one wholesale rather than repairing it. I won't say it'll be cheaper, but in order to fix it up, I'd have to send it back to Saillune... It'll take two or three months at the soonest. And with shipping charges, you can expect the repair fees to total a small fortune."

"Hmm... Figures," I said, crossing my arms.

While I was hashing all this out with the shopkeep, Gourry was staring at the magic items lining the shelves, goggling like a child in a toy store.

"By the way, are you a traveler? I don't think I've seen you 'round here."

"Yeah, I am."

"In that case, I hope this doesn't sound too unfriendly, but walking back to Saillune for the repairs yourself would probably save time and money."

"I would love to, but I can't," I said with a grim smile. "I'm in the employ of a local named Laddock—"

"Ah! I see!" The woman nodded in understanding. "So you're the one Master Laddock was searching for... Lina, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I see, I see. Bet he's treating you real nice."

...

"Yeah... sure," I responded vaguely.

Is that unsociable asshole nice to anyone? I pondered this while the old lady just kept on talking.

"His father was an excellent merchant... but between you and me, he wasn't the friendly type. But Master Laddock is so good-natured. He doesn't have the knack for mercantile like his old man did, but he travels all around for pleasure. Gets the most out of life, you know? Of course, some folks call him a dilettante, but I say all the money in the world means nothing if you don't have a good heart—don't you agree?"

"Well... I guess that's true."

Ack! This old lady's trying to catch me in her web of idle gossip!

"Now, you see, Master Laddock asked me to help him with something..." I decided to follow her lead on the "master" bit as I tried to steer the conversation back on track. "Of course, I'm not at liberty to reveal the details, but I'm serving as his bodyguard. I don't have a lot of time to spare, so I'm just going to have to buy new pauldrons!"

"I see. In that case..." The old woman thought a minute. "Enchanted pauldrons, eh? I do have a few in storage. One set made out of hollowed-out raja dragon bone..."

"Oh?" I found myself gasp.

Raja dragon bone was light and sturdy, but raja dragons were rare these days, so armor made from them was out of stock pretty much everywhere. The people who *did* have it were loath to let it go for anything short of an exorbitant sum. To find a piece in a place like this...

"It's expensive, isn't it?"

"Not at all. The last ten owners all died horrible deaths, so I'll make it cheap."

"...Pass."

How can you even sell something like that?

"Really? Well, I also have leather ones embedded with

jeweled amulets, ones lined with wyvern wing...”

Hmm, none of these options were really grabbing me. Not that I was in a situation to be picky...

“Oh, I know!” The old woman clapped her hands together. “I have a set a traveler sold to me a little while back... Don’t know what they’re made of, though. Care to see them?”

“Sure,” I agreed readily. I was willing to give it a shot.

“Let me see... I think it was...” The old lady rooted around in the back of the shop for a while. “Here you go.”

She came back with a set of black pauldrons. They were of a material similar to the filed-down great turtle shell guards I used to wear, but the texture was slightly different. They were unpolished and rimmed with metal, each embedded with a jeweled amulet in the center. They didn’t have much in the way of ornamentation, but they were surprisingly light when I picked them up—and, more importantly, sturdy.

I didn’t know what they were made of, but they had to be better than cursed bone pauldrons or basic naught-but-leather ones.

“Are these pricey?” I asked hesitantly.

“Oh, no,” the woman replied with a dismissive wave. “I don’t know what they’re made of, and I didn’t pay much for them. I’ll cut you a deal.”

Yes! My gut was telling me this was an incredible find. Of course, if I acted too eager, she’d rob me blind!

“Hmm... Well, they’re better than leather, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable buying something of an unknown material...”

Let the haggling begin!

“Man, what a score!” I’d gotten my hands on new pauldrons for less than I expected, and accordingly left the shop on cloud nine. Gourry walking along beside me, however, was drained. “What’s the matter? You look exhausted.”

"Oh, well... I kind of regret coming shopping with you."

"Huh. I guess looking at magic items isn't much fun for you, is it?"

"Actually... that's not the problem," he replied, letting out a big sigh as he looked up at the setting sun bathing the city in crimson light.

Ahh, yeah. I guess we *had* been in the shop a while, what with all the bartering and the gossip and such.

"Anyhoo... What should we do now? Stop by and see Zel?"

"Nah, I think it's fine. Nothing's happened since last night, and our boss'll probably get mad at us if we're back too late again."

"Fair enough... Hey, after dinner, would you give me some more sword training?"

"Sure. And speaking of... You've got an unconscious habit I need to tell you about. You don't do it every time, but when you're trying to avoid a frontal attack, you almost always dodge to the left. You should probably fix that."

Huh?

"For real?"

"Yeah," Gourry said, nodding easily.

Well, if I'd realized it, I guess it wouldn't be an "unconscious habit." I'd have to pay more attention tonight.

"Great! Let's do this!"

I shouldn't have gotten so excited...

I was in the room I'd been allotted on the second floor of the Lanzard mansion. I laid my exhausted body on the bed as self-reproaching thoughts entered my mind.

Gourry's assessment this evening was right. I really did favor my left when I dodged. But if I thought too much about it, I didn't react in time.

(Training had consisted of Gourry using a thin tree branch to poke at me again and again. I think the bastard even found it amusing which, let me assure you, it definitely was not.)

Worse yet, trying to dodge in ways I was unaccustomed to had made me unusually tense. It left me with a good case of workout fatigue after our sparring session. I'd already had a nice soak in the bath and was more than ready to get some beauty rest.

Boy, my muscles are sore... I thought as I began to drift off.

But then it hit me. I sat up straight in bed, grabbing my cape and sword. I'd felt this before. It was like a premonition. Like something just wasn't right.

I recognized the source.

"You're there, aren't you?" I said to the window.

There was a moment of silence, and then...

"Indeed," replied a familiar voice.

It was Zuma.

3: On a Journey, Ready for a Showdown

Clank! With a flash of silver light, the window latch fell to the floor. The window then opened with a creak. A shadow hung outside in the night sky, backed by the shining full moon.

Talk about déjà vu...

"I came to Vezendi, just like you asked," I said, drawing my sword. But...

"You won't be buying any time," he said, placing a hand on the window frame.

Ugh! He was already onto me? In that case...

"Amelia!" I called as I sprang to my left. Not a second later...

"Gaav Flare!"

Roar! A streak of red light scorched the bed right along with the window! Zuma dodged it in the nick of time, however, landing just inside.

"Long time no see!" Amelia shouted, pointing boldly at the assassin. "I thought this might happen, so I hid under Lina's bed!"

Yup. Laddock had given us all separate rooms, but I knew I would be the first one targeted, so Amelia had sneaked into my room for the night. Unfortunately, however...

"I think he knew that already," I said.

Amelia was cowed into silence for a moment. I mean, it was really no surprise that a skilled assassin like Zuma could detect how many people were in a room from the window—which then allowed him to dodge Amelia's surprise attack.

"No matter!" she declared, recovering. "I was

overconfident at first, but you won't have it so easy now!"

"Heh..."

With that small chuckle, Zuma zoomed toward me! I had to stop my legs from instinctively moving backward. I couldn't afford to endanger Amelia by relying solely on her. It was time to put my new shortsword and the fruits of my training with Gourry to the test!

Clink! The moment Zuma and I crossed paths, my brand-new blade snapped. *Oh, come the freak on!* Was using a sword on this guy just impossible?!

As he passed me, Zuma threw out a kick that I dodged—not because I saw it coming, but simply because I assumed it was. A moment later, his left hand was reaching for my neck!

Not this again!

I managed to evade it by reeling back, and felt a slight breeze pass over my throat. I threw my broken shortsword at Zuma, which held him at bay long enough for me to straighten up and start on a chant.

"Dam Blas!" Amelia incanted first.

Zuma readily dodged her spell, but she continued to charge him anyway. Perhaps realizing she was a danger that couldn't be ignored, Zuma turned to meet her head-on. Amelia was clearly at a disadvantage in this matchup. She was more or less Zuma's equal in agility, but he far outmatched her in terms of sheer strength. I had to do something!

"Lighting!" I shouted.

The assassin twisted to avert the light I threw at him—but this one wasn't intended to blind him! Instead, it sailed right up to the ceiling and cast a bright light down on the room that projected shadows behind us all. Yes, exactly as planned... Now I could use a Shadow Snap to keep him in place!

But before I could finish the incantation—*Thump, thump, thump!*—there came a pounding at the door.

"What's wrong, Lina?! Did something happen?"

It was Gourry. I should've known we'd get some attention with all the racket we were making. I could hear the voices of various servants gathering outside the door too...

"What is it?"

"An invader?"

"Is Master Laddock safe?! Go check on him!"

"Someone call the city watch!"

"Tch!" Realizing his time was up, Zuma whipped around.

"Wait, you!" Amelia ordered.

But he promptly ignored her (I mean, obviously) and flew out the window, into the night.

Wha-bam! At nearly the exact same time, the door crashed open and Gourry ran in.

"Are you all right, Lina?!" he shouted.

"Yeah... Amelia's fine too," I sighed.

"And after all that, he just got away?!" Laddock, dressed in his nightgown and slippers, barked with his usual crabbiness.

I understood why he was mad, of course. Not only had Amelia destroyed the window and put a hole in the wall with magic, Gourry had also just straight-up kicked the door down.

"The assassin did all that!" I claimed, desperate to shift the blame.

"Liar!" Laddock assumed without hesitation.

I paused, considering coming clean... but it just wasn't in my nature to simply roll over.

"Wh-What makes you so sure?!" I countered.

"Well... if the assassin could bust through walls, why didn't he just blow you all up from outside, hmm?!"

"Because assassins like Zuma don't roll like that!"

That much was the honest truth—I don't know if it was a matter of professional pride or what, but his ilk preferred to kill with their own two hands.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Laddock continued to press me.
“Why was he using magic like that in the first place, then?!”

“Urk!”

“And regardless, the end result is the same—you let him get away! For pity’s sake! I’m paying you enough to be my bodyguards, yet you blow up my house and let the killer escape?! I have a few complaints to register about your service!”

“I told you to kick them out already, Dad.” This interruption came from the idle brat Abel, who must have arrived on the scene while I wasn’t looking. “Think about it. They could easily be lying about the attack. We should toss them out and—”

“Shut up!” Laddock managed to roar before Amelia and I could. “I told you already! If they’re frauds, all I’m out is a little money! If they’re not, I’m out my life!”

“If they’re *not* frauds, it’s all the more urgent that you get rid of them!” Abel insisted, refusing to relent. “You said Zuma would target that woman before you, right? So just throw her out! Then he’ll leave to go after her!”

“So you want me to spend the rest of my life in fear of an assassin that might or might not come?! The only way I’ll ever sleep soundly again is if I can keep tabs on this whole affair for myself!”



The man had a point. Tangible fears were easier to steel yourself against than invisible ones. That was why people tended to fall into one of two categories: those who were compelled to get to the bottom of problems, and those who fervently denied their existence. And as long as the threat of Zuma loomed, Laddock couldn't stick his head in the ground on this one. If I couldn't kill Zuma, he wanted Zuma to kill me right here under his nose where he could deal with it immediately. That was why he was keeping us on a short leash.

But that also meant... unless we finished things with Zuma fast, we'd be stuck with this bickering father and son forever.

"Even so, Dad! If this kind of chaos happens every night, it will ruin us!"

"Hmm... True, but..." Abel's words briefly forced Laddock into silence. "I still can't just kick them out! Is that understood?" he shouted with finality before striding out of the room.

"Dammit..." Abel cursed after a pause, then made his own exit.

That left me, Gourry, Amelia, and the live-in servants in the room.

"Don't let it bother you, dearie," said a plump old lady. I think I'd seen her in the kitchen a time or two. "They're both just on edge because the master's life is in danger. They usually get along very well."

"Really?" Amelia asked, shocked. I was pretty aghast myself.

"Yes, really," the woman continued. "The master's had to raise his son all by himself ever since his wife's passing, you see..."

Ah, it was back! The deadly gossip trap! She looked like a nice old lady, but if we let her get started, she was gonna talk our ears off until dawn.

"Then all the more reason to take care of business!" I said,

interrupting her at the first opportunity. “I’ll get rid of that assassin as fast as I can! So... oh yeah! If an assassin is after the master, someone must’ve hired him! Any idea who might do that?”

“Let me think...” the old lady said pensively before beginning, “The master isn’t the kind of man to make enemies... but you never can tell, can you? I don’t know if I’d say he was an enemy, but there was this one fellow named Lezack. The master hired him recently, but then had to let him go immediately. He’s a likely suspect, if you ask me. Oh, and plenty of men might have had it in for the master’s late father! Brilliant though he was, he could be quite greedy... Earned himself a lot of hard feelings, he did! Master Balwom, for instance, is the richest merchant in town now, but the master’s father was always beating him to good deals. And...”

And so, my careless question triggered a torrent of... evidence or gossip, whatever you want to call it. We were there until sunup after all.

The next afternoon, we were about town. Last night—or, rather, early this morning—after story time with Granny, we’d had breakfast and crashed until about noon before heading out.

I was totally bushed. Staying at Laddock’s place put us smack in the middle of an unending father-son shouting match, so the three of us—that is, the group minus Xellos—got permission from Laddock to head into the city. It was on the pretense of gathering information, but I also snagged myself a replacement for my broken shortsword while we were out. Not the best in the world, but it was decent enough. I was really racking up the expenses on this trip, huh?

“So? What have you learned?” Zel asked once we caught him up to speed.

We’d stopped by the inn where he was staying in the

early evening as the sun started to dip low in the sky. We were currently seated around a table in the first-floor restaurant. Talking here raised the risk of eavesdroppers, but that was preferable to getting trapped in another demon barrier.

"Nothing conclusive, to be honest," I reported unhappily. "The family business has been waning since Laddock Lanzard took over. Not fatally, mind you. It's just that most of his competition is saying stuff like, 'The Laddock era's been easy street for me.' There was definitely some bad blood with his dad, but everyone insists that if they were going to hire an assassin, they'd have gone after his old man and not him."

"Makes sense to me," Zelgadis said with a nod.

"And then there's this Lezack guy that Laddock fired and has since gone missing."

"He's missing?"

"Yeah. I talked to some people who knew him, and they said he got canned for pilfering money from Laddock's household. Apparently he got drunk the night it happened and said he was gonna leave town. Then, the next day, no one could find him anywhere. It doesn't seem like he was mixed up in any trouble, so the general consensus is that he was good for his word. But he was also apparently penniless and kind of a gutless coward... not to mention he'd been fired for the same thing once or twice before. In short, it's hard to believe a down-on-his-luck guy like that would spend what little money he *did* have hiring an assassin like Zuma to kill Laddock."

"So... the grudge angle's come up dry, then?"

"Alas," I said with a sigh.

"By the way, I was wondering..." Zelgadis said, a note of dissatisfaction in his voice. "If I could change the subject for a moment, what exactly is Xellos doing?"

"Playing chess," Amelia responded, also sounding dissatisfied.

"Is that idiot even taking this seriously?!"

"Probably not," I put in. I exchanged a glance with Zel and Amelia, then continued, "Listen up, you two. Don't get the wrong idea. Xellos is just along for the ride here. He's not one of us, and he isn't on our side."

"Fair."

"That's true, but..."

There, they let out a collective sigh. What I said may have sounded harsh, but it was indeed the truth. Until we knew what Xellos was really after, we couldn't count on him as part of the team.

"Anyway, Zel," I continued, "Zuma attacked last night as expected. Have any suspicious men come to stay in this inn recently?"

"What kind of a question is that?" he replied with a shrug. "There're a lot of suspicious figures in the area, myself included. And if Zuma's a fighter on par with Gourry, that means he has the ability to mask his true power. Plus, he might have arrived before we did. It would be impossible to pick him out of a group like this."

Okay, valid...

"I guess we're playing the waiting game, then," I conceded with a long sigh.

"Now, here's what I've been wondering. How are those demons involved in all this?" Zel asked.

"That's a good question." I thought for a minute. "An assassin trying to kill me tells me to come to Vezendi, and the minute we get here, we run into a group of demons that has it in for me and Gourry. There's no way that's a coincidence. But I find it hard to believe Zuma hired demons to kill me for him. He's a real hands-on kind of guy."

"Maybe the demons contacted him, then?"

"That doesn't seem right either. Knowing Seigram... I can't imagine him deigning to throw in with some human hitman."

"This is just an idea, but..." Amelia chimed in. "Zuma was

hired to kill you, and also to kill Laddock. What if whoever hired him also has a pact with those demons?"

"One of which just *happens* to be a demon with a grudge against us?"

"Yeah... Kind of a stretch, huh?"

"Either way," Gourry piped up, "we just have to beat them all."

"Well, that's true, but..."

Gourry's approach might have seemed overly simplistic, but he was right. Our only real option right now was waiting for the bad guys to show up so we could beat 'em.

A battle of attrition on two fronts... Maximum ugh. I let out another deep sigh.

"Master Laddock awaits," announced the butler when we returned to the estate.

The three of us looked at each other and shared a groan. Whoopie, another bitchfest! Had to wonder where the guy got the energy...

Granted, he was still my employer, so I couldn't just blow him off.

Raltark the butler led us to the parlor, then took his inconspicuous post in the corner of the room. Laddock was already there, as were Xellos and Abel for some reason.

"You're late!" Laddock bellowed with his usual grump, and without even offering us a seat. I ignored him and took a spot on the sofa, where Gourry and Amelia joined me. "But no matter. I didn't bring you here to yell at you today."

Wow, really? Someone check the sky for flying pigs...

Laddock looked around the room, then continued, "Tomorrow, I'm heading out on a trip."

"What?!" we all cried in unison, including Abel.

"Are you crazy, Dad?!" Abel railed, leaning forward. "Have you forgotten that someone's trying to kill you? I don't know what the best thing to do in a situation like this is, but 'going on a trip' can't be it!"

"I'm running low on certain inventory! I have to go buy more!" Laddock argued, raising his voice over Abel's.

"You could send someone else to do it!"

"I agree!" Amelia interjected. "It's bad enough in the city! Leaving is just asking to be attacked! You'll be playing right into their hands!"

"This is my *business* we're talking about!" Laddock hollered even louder, silencing Abel and Amelia both. "I always go on acquisition trips myself to ensure the quality of my goods, and I won't let this get in the way of that!" He then turned to look at me. "Of course, I'll be taking you with me as my escort! This is all covered by your contract, so I don't want to hear one word of complaint!"

Go figure. Everything he was saying was reasonable enough, but I was starting to suspect his true motives lay elsewhere. Still, as long as his logic was sound, I couldn't really argue... Oh well.

"Fine," I said firmly. "When do we head out?"

"Well..." Laddock hesitated, clearly caught by surprise. "As soon as possible, but I have some preparations to make. The day after tomorrow, I imagine."

"Okay. The truth is, we have another companion in town..."

"Here in Vezendi?"

"Yes. He's out gathering information. We can bring him along, can't we?"

"I won't pay you one coin more for it."

If that's the hill you want to die on... Weird, but okay.

"So be it," I said through my teeth.

I had a big bone to pick about that, actually. But Xellos was already basically a freeloader, and as far as Laddock could see, we hadn't done anything useful so far. Trying to negotiate could backfire.

"Very well," Laddock agreed with a nod. "Then it's decided. We'll prepare—"

"Wait," Abel said, cutting off his father.

“What? More complaints?”

In contrast, Abel shook his head: “No. I won’t argue with you anymore. But I am coming with you.”

“Have you gone mad, Abel?!” It was now his father’s turn to shout. He looked panicked. “They’re trying to kill me, you know!”

“I know that. I said as much earlier. But I’m still your son. If I’m going to take over the business someday, I want to see how you do things.”

“But... now of all times?” Laddock asked, sounding truly concerned.

“You can’t change my mind. I’m coming, whether you like it or not,” he insisted before spinning on his heels and making for the door.

“Get back here, Abel!”

But the young man left anyway, ignoring his father’s protests.

“Argh!” With a growl, Laddock stood up and chased after his son. He turned back at the door to shout, “Anyway, get ready!” before disappearing through it.

Silence lingered in Laddock’s wake. Eventually Raltark, who’d been standing quietly at attention in the corner, gave us a bow and took his leave without a word. That left the four of us—me, Amelia, Gourry, and Xellos—sitting in the room alone.

“Wow, Lina, you really let him walk all over you,” Gourry said after a little while. “I was sure you were gonna fight tooth and nail... especially about the pay.”

“Well, I gave it a good think,” I said hesitantly. “I believe I’ve puzzled out what Laddock’s really up to.”

“And what’s that?” Amelia asked this time.

“What do you think, Xellos?” I said, suddenly turning to the man who’d sat in silence all this time.

“Really, I’ve been such an outsider this time, I could hardly presume to form an opinion...”

“Give it a shot anyway.”

"Well, if I may... This is a trap, most likely."

"I think so too," I agreed.

"Uh... I'm not following," Gourry said, scratching his head.

"Okay, here's the deal. Laddock can't stand the stalemate. As long as we're here at the estate, Zuma's gonna keep attacking to no avail—walls will get blasted, people will come running, the works. And each time we go through the motions, the property damage toll goes up along with payroll. Meanwhile, the showdown keeps getting forestalled and Laddock keeps living in mortal fear. He's never been involved in this cloak-and-dagger stuff, so he can't take the heat. That's why he wants to take us out of the city on the pretense of a business trip. We'll look like sitting ducks to Zuma, who should come running... and then we settle things once and for all."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Amelia stood up, raising her voice. "Doesn't that mean he's intentionally putting you at risk?!"

"Whaaaat?!" Gourry shouted, apparently finding Amelia's explanation easier to understand than mine. "Hey, Lina! Why'd you agree, then?!"

"Well, c'mon, I want to settle this ASAP too. I'm sick of looking over my shoulder all the time. Besides, think about it. The longer this drags on, the longer we have to listen to Laddock's whining and his incessant squabbling with his son."

"Ugh..." Gourry and Amelia groaned in unison. They clearly felt the same way I did about that prospect.

"But it's still not a good idea, is it?" Amelia said, suddenly serious.

"What makes you say that?"

"If you get killed on the road, Zuma will just go after Laddock next. There won't be anyone else to protect him."

"Tsk, ts, ts," I said, holding up my index finger. "Poor naive Amelia. If Zuma kills me, Laddock will have plenty of protection—you guys!"

Gourry and Amelia stared for a minute. Seemed they

didn't catch my drift.

"Let's just say Zuma manages to kill me. What would you guys do?" I asked.

"Have a funeral, of course," replied Gourry.

"Rifle through your stuff, I guess," said Amelia.

"I'd most certainly laugh," added Xellos.

Wow, you guys are the worst...

"That's not what I meant... I'm *saying* you'd want to avenge me by killing Zuma, wouldn't you?!"

"Well, maybe... Oh!" Amelia said quietly, finally seeming to catch on. Gourry was, per usual, still two steps behind.

"Yup. If Zuma kills me and you guys want revenge, you'd probably end up sticking around Laddock while you waited for him to attack again. In other words, whether you like it or not, you'd be babysitting the guy. If Zuma killed him too, you'd lose his trail for good. Get it now, Gourry?"

"I think so..."

"Unforgivable!" Amelia shouted angrily, her fists clenched and her silhouette backed by flame. "Taking advantage of human kindness for his own ends... If that's his aim, Lina, you don't have to go along with this! Abandon him and save yourself!"

"I can't exactly do that..."

"Why not?!"

"He paid us an advance. Besides, like I said, I'm anxious to finish this too."

"I mean... if you're all right with it, I guess it's okay," Gourry whispered. "So... what about the demons?"

...

Craaaaap! I hadn't even thought of that!

"Er... we'll work it out somehow," I responded, trying hard to sound calm.

The afternoon after we left Vezendi City, the sky was the color of lead as we traveled down a nameless road without another soul on it.

We were apparently going to purchase herbs in a city called Zeram, which was a short trip to the north. We had our usual crew—including Zel (face covered) and Xellos—as well as Abel (who'd tagged along, true to his word) and Laddock. Raltark the butler was driving (what a multitasking guy!) the wagon, which consisted of a single covered bed led by a tired old horse. Its wheels squeaked as they churned through the gravel.

Even out here in the sticks, where seeing people would be more of a surprise than not, there were apparently still bandits—or so I'd heard at the roadhouse where we stayed last night. As such, Gourry and I were walking on the right side of the sluggishly traveling vehicle with Amelia and Zelgadis on the left. Xellos was bringing up the rear, and we were all keeping an eye out. Since the wagon was empty on the way down, the Lanzards were riding in the cargo bed. Not that it looked especially comfortable.

"Wait a minute!" Gourry shouted suddenly.

Raltark stopped the wagon on cue.

"What is it?!" Laddock barked with his go-to thunder.

"The enemy," I responded casually, and after a moment of silence...

"I-Is it *him*?!"

"No," Zelgadis answered, drawing his broadsword.

Zel was right. I could sense several people, and based on their presences, they didn't seem especially skilled. Just your run-of-the-mill bandit types.

The nerve of these jerks! Didn't they know we had bigger things to worry about?

On the other hand, however, I welcomed the chance to blow off a little steam. After putting up with Laddock's complaints, the never-ending father-son horn-locking, plus willy-nilly assassin and demon attacks... It was time for a little diversion.

"Quit hiding and come out, you hear?" I called.

"Don't provoke them!" Laddock shouted from the wagon

—a request I promptly ignored.

But the only other response I got was the whistling of the wind through the twilight trees. Betcha the goons were mad I'd called out their lousy hiding job!

"What's wrong? Come on out already! Or are you afraid of an even fight?!"

"H-How dare you!" retaliated a braying voice at last.

A few men then emerged from the underbrush. Bandits, as expected... About twenty. Aw, was that really all of them? Bummer.

They had us surrounded, technically, but I didn't exactly feel threatened. I could probably handle the lot of them easily enough myself.

"See?! Didn't I tell you? Now we're completely surrounded!" whined Laddock, he of little faith, from the safety of the wagon. Raltark looked a little surprised, but not particularly upset. I couldn't see Abel's reaction from my current position, but he didn't seem to be panicking like his father was.

Obviously ignoring Laddock, the bandit leader kept blustering: "Well, if it's a fight you want, we'll give it to you. But if you value your lives, I suggest you hand over your money."

"Oh, shut up," I retorted bluntly, rendering him silent. "Let's get one thing straight early on: You guys are trash we don't have time to take out right now."

"T-Trash?!"

Got 'im.

"All right, then! No mercy! C'mon, boys! Kill 'em all!"

"Yeah!" they roared in chorus as they charged at us.

Heh. Idiots.

"Flare Arrow!"

I unleashed the spell I'd been chanting, conjuring a dozen or so flaming arrows that rained down on the incoming bandits.

"Argh!"

“Gyeh!”

Screams rang out here and there from bandits writhing in pain. I’d only hit a couple of them, but the abruptness of my attack scattered them good.

“Go, Gourry!”

“Right!”

Gourry leaped out, sword drawn. I couldn’t see it from my position, but there seemed to be fighting on the other sides of the carriage too. I could hear blades clashing and Amelia chanting a spell... Behind us, Xellos was taunting a few bandits with his staff. Meanwhile, all poor Laddock could do was cower inside the wagon, occasionally shouting this or that without even bothering to look outside.

“Bram Blazer!”

Whoom! Bandit A took a direct hit and went flying. Given the situation, I couldn’t use anything too big or flashy that might catch the wagon or my allies. I was relegated to picking off small fry with smaller spells. That made it less stress relief, and more pest control. Alas.

“You guys really are bottom-feeders,” I snarked, setting my sights on the boss-looking bandit I’d talked to earlier.

“You think so, do you?!” he shouted, near apoplectic. He then raised his right hand high, and...

Vrooosh! I heard something rip through the air and quickly dodged. Then... *Whunk!* An arrow, still wobbling, appeared in the side of the wagon.

Did they have backup in the woods?! I scanned all around me and, sure enough, detected a faint aura of hostility amid the brush in the direction the arrow had come from.

Got you now! I began chanting a spell, but before I could finish—*Vroom!*—another arrow tore through the air! It wasn’t aimed at me...

The wagon?! Crap!

The horse neighed urgently—they’d hit the old beast to try to get the wagon away from us! And I was too late to stop it! With newfound speed, the horse began retreating. Gourry

and Zel didn't realize what was going on until it was in full flight.

Ugh!

"Blast Ash!" I incanted, unleashing a spell that turned part of the forest, along with the hostile presences within, to ash.

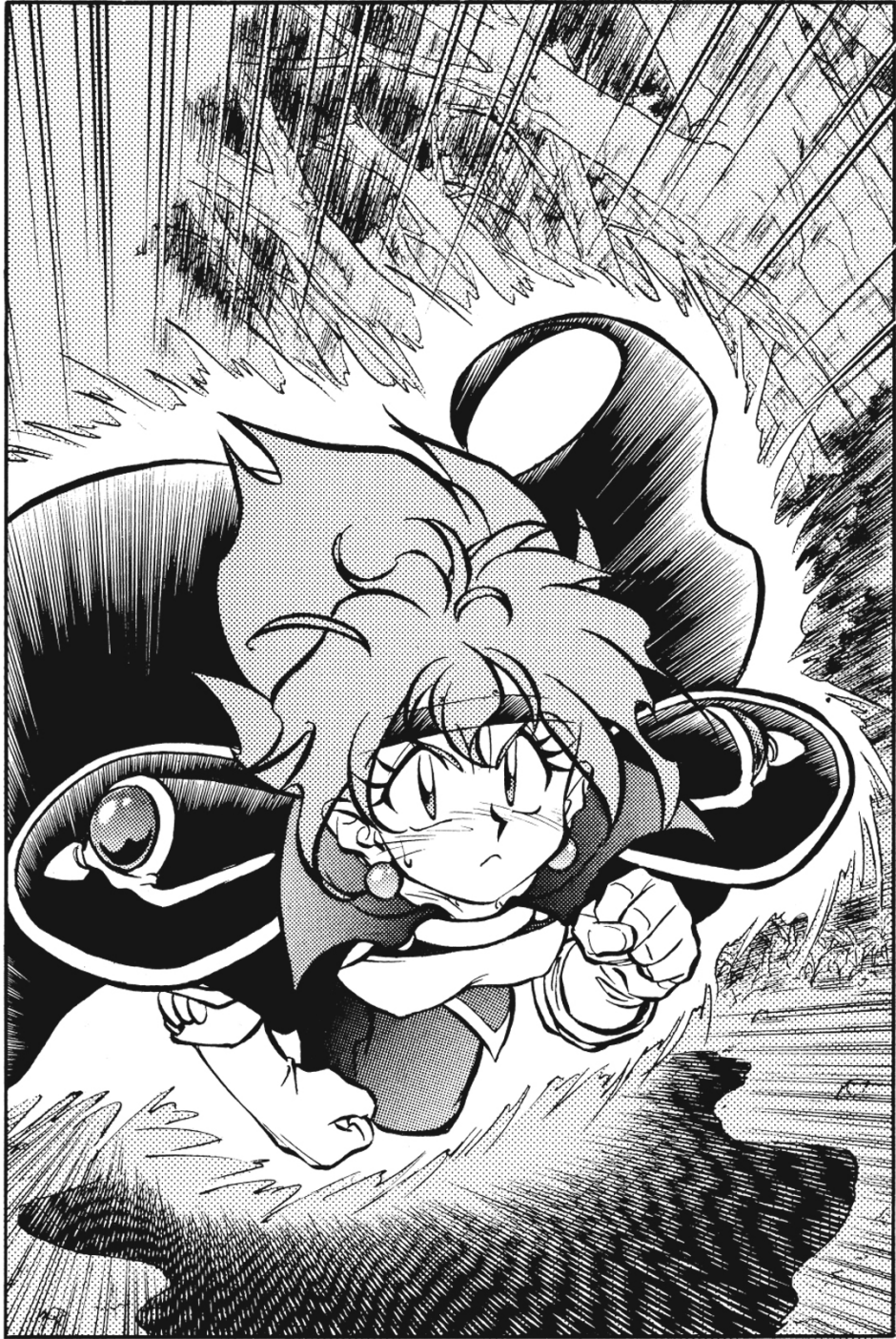
"What?!" the bandit boss yelped in shock. "No! This wasn't the deal!"

Oh, it wasn't, eh? That was an interesting tidbit to overhear, but I didn't have time to investigate further right now.

"Gourry! Take him alive!" I ordered, indicating the boss before beginning another chant. "Lei Wing!"

By the time I'd cast my swift-flight spell and taken off into the air, the wagon had already disappeared down the winding road. Still, there was only one path it could take... I just had to catch up!

Wreathed in my barrier of wind, I sailed after it. The carrying capacity, max altitude, and general speed of Lei Wing were a balanced ratio that depended on the caster's skill. To catch up with the speeding wagon, I had to skate along the ground at a pace that was honestly a little scary.



Soon enough, the wagon came back into view a ways down the tree-flanked road. I'd caught up! I mustered all the will I had to pick up speed, and then...

Bwoom! Flames consumed my vision.

"What?!" I was blasted off course and hit the ground hard. If not for the wind barrier around me, it might have been fatal.

The culprit was a Flare Arrow... Countless arrows of flame that had slammed into my Lei Wing.

"Ngh!"

I quickly dismissed my spell and picked myself up. There was a rustling in the trees nearby, and the enemy caster stepped out. It was a lesser demon—no, four of them!

What?! What are these things doing here?!

Lesser demons were the lowest class of demon, but they still had considerable resistance to shamanistic spells. You had to be a pretty good sorcerer or swordsman to face off with one. Obviously, they weren't a threat to *me personally*, but I was kinda strapped for time here! The wagon was already out of sight again, and Gourry and the others were too far behind to help... I'd just have to bust through somehow! I started by chanting a spell.

One of the demons let out a howl, sending a dozen or so Flare Arrows raining down on me! I managed to dodge them without breaking off my chant, but a second demon was already shooting another volley of flaming arrows my way.

Ugh! So annoying!

"Ragna Blast!"

At my summons, a pillar of darkness appeared around a lesser demon as black plasma scorched its body. *That's one down!*

The remaining three demons, seemingly unfazed, kept the rain of fire coming. I continued to dodge and moved into another chant. Gotta say, the lesser demons' attacks were way too simple... Were they just here to slow me down?!

When my chant was finished, I positioned myself so that I

had two demons in a straight line... and let 'er fly!

"Gaav Flare!"

The magical flame I unleashed opened a hole the first one's chest, and evaporated the head off the second. *Only one to go!* Unsurprisingly, I had to deal with another flaming arrow barrage before I could get to it.

There was no question in my mind now. These goons were *definitely* here to slow me down. But who sent them? Probably not the bandits, although... *C'mon, Lina, beat the baddies first and ask questions later!*

"Dynast Blas!"

Tendrils of lightning formed a five-pointed star around the lesser demon, ensnaring it. There was a flash of electric blue light, and when it was gone, the demon's charred body fell to the ground.

Okay! All done here! Now I just have to catch up with the carriage again and—

I looked back in the direction it had gone, and stopped cold. There was a figure limping toward me.

"Abel?!" I quickly ran over to him. "What's going on?"

His clothes were in tatters and he was battered all over, dragging one leg behind him.

"I jumped out of the wagon," he said, his voice a little muffled, like he'd bitten his cheek. "Dad and... Raltark are still on board. You have to help them..."

With that, he slumped against a nearby tree. He looked like he was in pain, though none of his wounds looked particularly serious.

"Okay," I nodded and began chanting again. "Lei Wing!"

I sped a bit farther down the road and caught sight of something in the distance. Was it the wagon?! It must have lost its balance along the way, because it was toppled onto its side now. I dismissed my spell as I got closer and touched down on the ground. There was no sign of the two men who'd been riding in the wagon. Just the collapsed horse, breathing in agony.

"Geh..." I heard a soft moan and turned around to see Raltark seated on a tree root nearby. "Y-You..."

"Are you all right?! Where's La— er, Master Laddock?"

"I'm fine..." Raltark replied, grimacing slightly. "But Zuma the assassin appeared..."

"Zuma?!"

"He told me to tell you... 'I have Laddock Lanzard. If you want him back alive, come with Gourry Gabriev to the hunting cabin in the mountains east of the village of Duphon.'"

A challenge, eh?

"My, how dreadful," a sudden voice said, causing me to whip around.

"Don't scare me like that, Xellos... Where's everyone else?"

"They finished the bandits off and are heading this way."

Hmm... I had a feeling I knew what Xellos was up to this time.

"Xellos, look after Raltark. I'm going to rejoin the others."

"I... I don't know anything!" the bandit boss cried pitifully once we were all around him. Gourry had captured him alive, just as I'd asked.

"Don't lie. I heard you say, 'This wasn't the deal.'"

"Th-That was just..." he stammered. "Last night, a man came to our base..." Realizing it was futile, perhaps, the man began to talk. "He was clad all in black... Called himself Zuma. Normally we would've just killed the guy, but he brought demons with him. Like heck we could fight demons..."

"Demons?!" I echoed. "You mean lesser demons?"

"How should I know?! I've heard stories about demons, but it's not like I'd ever seen one before!"

Had Zuma been the one to send those lesser demons after me? I hadn't pegged him for a skilled summoner... Didn't really fit his image.

“Okay, fine... What happened next?” I asked.

“He threw some money at us and said he needed our help. He said tomorrow—well, today now—a wagon would be coming down this road and that we were supposed to separate it from its escort. If we succeeded, he said he’d give us even more money. He threatened us with the demons too, so it wasn’t like we could refuse. He said the escort was nothing special. That if we needed help, the demons would provide it. And so we agreed... but you’re actually super strong and the demons never showed. That’s what wasn’t the deal.”

“I see...”

So he intended from the start to kidnap Laddock? Or maybe he’d meant to finish me and Laddock off together...

“You do? Then can I please go?”

“Of course not!” Amelia said, pointing dramatically at the man. “Don’t think we can simply overlook your more mundane wrongdoings! We’re handing you over to the closest authorities! Stay quiet and accept your fate!”

“Nooo! Anything but that! I’ll change my ways! Please, give me a second chance!”

“Never! Normally, the wrath of heaven would fall upon you here and now—”

I tuned out the rest of their exchange as my thoughts turned elsewhere. If Zuma was kicking things into high gear... our next meeting would probably be the final showdown.

“A showdown, huh?” I whispered, too quiet for any of the others to hear.

The wind whistled through the evening sky. Gray clouds swarmed the heavens above—pretty typical for this area and time of year. It had been like that ever since we left Vezendi.

It was about two days later now. Gourry and I were currently on a mountain road just wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and we’d just arrived at a log

cabin screened by black trees. It had to be the place Zuma mentioned.

"You ready?" Gourry asked, and I nodded silently.

I wasn't sure about Gourry, but coming this far had been pretty trying for me. We'd tangled with the masked assassin several times now and never managed to get rid of him, after all. The psychological pressure was the worst part.

I'd been keeping up my training with Gourry, of course, but it wasn't like I'd gotten to be a master swordsman overnight. If things came down to a one-on-one, there was no way I'd stand a chance.

We'd come close to defeating Zuma once, but that was almost entirely thanks to Gourry. I hadn't done much more than watch. Fortunately I had the big lug with me now, but there was still plenty to be worried about.

The fact that Zuma apparently had lesser demons at his command now, for example. If he sent a bunch of them to separate us, we'd be in for a tough fight. I would've liked to bring Amelia and Zelgadis along too, but Zuma having a hostage really tied our hands. Thus, everyone else was waiting back in Duphon at the foot of the mountain for us to return.

But that wasn't all. There was another question bugging me: Why had Zuma asked me to bring Gourry along? I thought he was only after me and Laddock. If he wanted to kill Gourry too, that would seem to suggest he wanted payback for the beating he took last time... But taking Laddock hostage and getting revenge on Gourry? It just didn't sound like Zuma's MO.

The last wild card on my mind was Seigram and his two buddies. He hadn't come after us again since our encounter at the inn, but that surely didn't mean he was finished with us.

Welp, stressing over it wasn't gonna do me any good! I had to fry the big fish in front of me first: Zuma!

With no particular plan in mind, Gourry and I approached

the hunting cabin. It wasn't very large, naturally... From outside, we could sense one faint presence within.

"I'll go in first," Gourry said, putting his hand on the door.

Squeeeak... An ill-fitting cry echoed out as the door swung open easily. Gourry quickly came to a dead halt. I poked my head past him and saw a plain, empty room furnished with nothing but a small stove and a small table with a cooking pot sitting on it. There was a pile of hay in the corner in place of a bed, and on top of it...

"Master... Laddock?"

A man was lying in the hay, hands tied behind his back. He was facing away from us, but it was unmistakably Laddock Lanzard. Fortunately, he seemed to be alive..

There was nary a sign of anyone else around. There wasn't anywhere to hide, either. It was a simple hunting cabin, so there weren't going to be any hidden doors or secret passageways here.

Granted, Zuma was probably capable of masking his presence from me. But Gourry didn't seem to notice anything either, which led me to believe we were in the clear.

"What's the plan?" Gourry asked.

"Hang on," I said and began chanting. "Dam Blas!"

Bwoom!

The spell I released blasted the hay beneath Laddock. I was worried Zuma might be hiding inside of it, but my Dam Blas scattered the dry grass without hitting anything. It did send Laddock rolling toward us, though.

"Guh..." he groaned.

Yup, it was definitely him. But then where was Zuma? All of a sudden, I sensed a new presence over my shoulder.

Damn! Behind me?! I quickly turned around and saw...

"Abel?!"

He must have run all the way here, for he stood in the doorway with his shoulders heaving.

"What... Abel?!" Laddock gasped softly, apparently

noticing his son.

"Dad!"

I couldn't stop him. He ran right past me into the single room and began untying his father's hands.

"You fool! What are you doing here?!" the older Lanzard demanded.

"I was worried about you, Dad!"

Laddock seemed at a loss for words. But the emotional silence was quickly interrupted...

"Linaaaa!" wailed Amelia's voice.

I turned back in surprise a second time to see not just Amelia, but Zel, Xellos, and Raltark too. They must have come to stop Abel, but... C'mon, guys! What'd we even split up for in the first place?!

"My, my... This wasn't the plan, was it?" called an eerie, familiar voice from behind me.

"What?!" I gasped.

I whipped around to spot a white lump hovering outside the cabin in otherwise empty space. It then produced countless tendrils of darkness that slithered outward, taking the shape of hair.

"Guduza?!" Amelia reflexively cried out.

But... what was she doing here?!

"Indeed... Simply outrageous, isn't it?" called another figure from the trees. It emerged slowly, as if to dramatize its own footsteps.

Duguld...

"We meet again, chimera child," he greeted Zel with a light tip of his hat. He then turned his gaze slightly and said, "We came here to help with revenge... but this feels less like vengeance and more like a farce. It's most unsightly... so I think it's time to put an end to things, Elder Raltark."

"What?!" Gourry, Zel, and Amelia shouted in the same breath.

"Hmm... I see," Raltark responded casually enough, then began to chant under his breath.

The echo of inhuman words carried on the wind. The forest sprung to life. The birds, beasts, and bugs all tried to flee in a hurry. They knew something was wrong... but it was too late.

Uuuowmm...

That must have been the word of power. A low rumble that made my ears ring ran through the air. A strange feeling fell over the mountain.

"Dear, oh dear..." Xellos said in an even voice. "I don't believe this was part of the agreement."

"Now, now. I can indulge myself this little bit, can't I?" Raltark responded in an equally even tone.

Skree! A bizarre cry like animals' screams, though not quite, rose up from the forest. *Skree! Skaaaree! Skree!*

And it wasn't just a few of them... There were a dozen, at least.

"What's going on?!" I shouted.

"Oh, hardly anything worth mentioning," Raltark replied indifferently. "Just a few lower-tier demons I called forth from the astral plane possessing the local wildlife."

What the— I found myself dumbstruck. What Raltark had just done... It was...

Grrragh! At last, the agonized cries coalesced into a roar... The legions of lesser demons Raltark had summoned appeared from within the forest!

"Now!" Duguld cried out in exaltation, brushing his cape back dramatically. "Let the ball begin!"

4: The Darkness Stirs, the Deathmatch Ends

Hraaaagh! The lesser demons' howl kicked off our battle. Their screeching conjured countless Flare Arrows ahead of their horde—in other words, all around us and the cabin! There had to be hundreds of them!

Ba-ba-ba-bwoosh!

Holy freakin' crap! While launching into a spell chant, I tackled Gourry into the cabin! Not a moment later...

"Wind!"

The instant I finished erecting a wind barrier inside—*Ker-crash!*—the cabin's exterior was awash with flame.

"What?!" Abel cried out from within the safety of the cabin and my barrier.

The demons had unleashed their Flare Arrow barrage on us. If we hadn't had both my wind barrier and the cabin to shield us, the scalding heat from the blast would have steamed us alive.

"Let's go, Gourry!" I called, dropping the barrier and moving into my next chant.

"Right!" Gourry rallied, drawing the Sword of Light and charging back outside.

We had escaped the lesser demons' first attack, but we would remain sitting ducks until we thinned their numbers some (preferably before they unleashed their second attack!). If we couldn't manage that, we'd be stuck on the defensive indefinitely.

"Dam Blas!" *Fwoom!* I blasted open a hole in the wall opposite the flame-wreathed cabin's door. "Abel! I'm going out the front to draw the demons' attention! Take your father

and hide in the forest!”

I didn’t even wait for his response—I was already out the door and chanting my next spell!

As expected, Zel and Amelia were both fine; they’d probably cast a twofold wind barrier to save themselves from the heat and flames, and they were now fighting alongside Gourry. I couldn’t see Raltark and Xellos anywhere, but it was hard to imagine either of them had come to any harm.

“Lighting!” After reciting my amplification chant, I tossed my light spell high into the air. Naturally, being the super-charged version, it was as bright as the midsummer sun... Well, okay, not *quite* that bright, but it was more than enough to fight by. It also cast some nice shadows along the ground.

I began another amplification chant, but the Lighting spell I’d just conjured was kind of like a beacon screaming, “Hey, over here!” A dozen or so lesser demons accordingly set their sights on me.

Graaagh! They howled up another Flare Arrow barrage!
J-Jeez, boys, can’t you give a girl a minute?!

I wasn’t gonna finish my spell in time! The flaming projectiles were already coming at me! I quickly dashed to get away, but there were too freakin’ many! I couldn’t dodge them all! But—

Fwish!

Just as they were about to hit me, the Flare Arrows vanished into thin air.

Wuh?

“That one’s on the house... But don’t count on it a second time,” called Xellos’s voice from somewhere nearby.

I didn’t have time to search him out, but I was grateful for the reprieve. Before my corporeal demon buddies could unleash a third barrage, I completed my spell!

“Dis Fang!”

My shadow on the ground, courtesy of Lighting, took the shape of innumerable dragon maws that snapped at the

shadows of the lesser demons around me.

The result—*Kraaaaaah!*—was a ghastly death rattle as black blood began spurting from their bodies... precisely where my shadowy dragons had champed their shadows.

“Hah!” Zel cried.

Vrm! He must have infused his broadsword with magic, because a single strike readily cut through a lesser demon’s stomach.

Scraaaah! Another demon nearby let out an angry howl, conjuring more Flare Arrows. But while the barrage summoned by a horde of his kin was a deadly force to be reckoned with, a single specimen could hardly produce enough to be a real threat. Experienced sorcerers knew how to stagger their Flare Arrows against a single target to make them harder to dodge, but these suckers’ attacks were simplistic at best. Their bolts still packed a wallop and there were plenty of them, to be sure. But for an experienced combatant who knew how to keep their cool and pay attention, they weren’t all that hard to avoid.

Zel read the timing of the incoming arrows and dashed forward while chanting a spell. He easily darted through them and closed the distance to his target in a second—but was forced to stop short as a swarm of dark bullets came flying at him! Duguld had entered the fray!

“I’ll finish you this time, chimera child!” he pronounced as he charged at Zel.

“Elemekia Flame!” Zel cried, unleashing the spell he’d been chanting. It was an enhanced version of the Elemekia Lance, which did no physical damage but was powerful enough to flay a human’s spirit in one blast.

“Tch!” Duguld clicked his tongue sharply as he dodged. Not even he wanted to take an Elemekia Flame head-on!

The spell went on to hit the lesser demon that had been standing behind him instead. Its body trembled, then collapsed with ground-shaking force and lay still. Meanwhile,

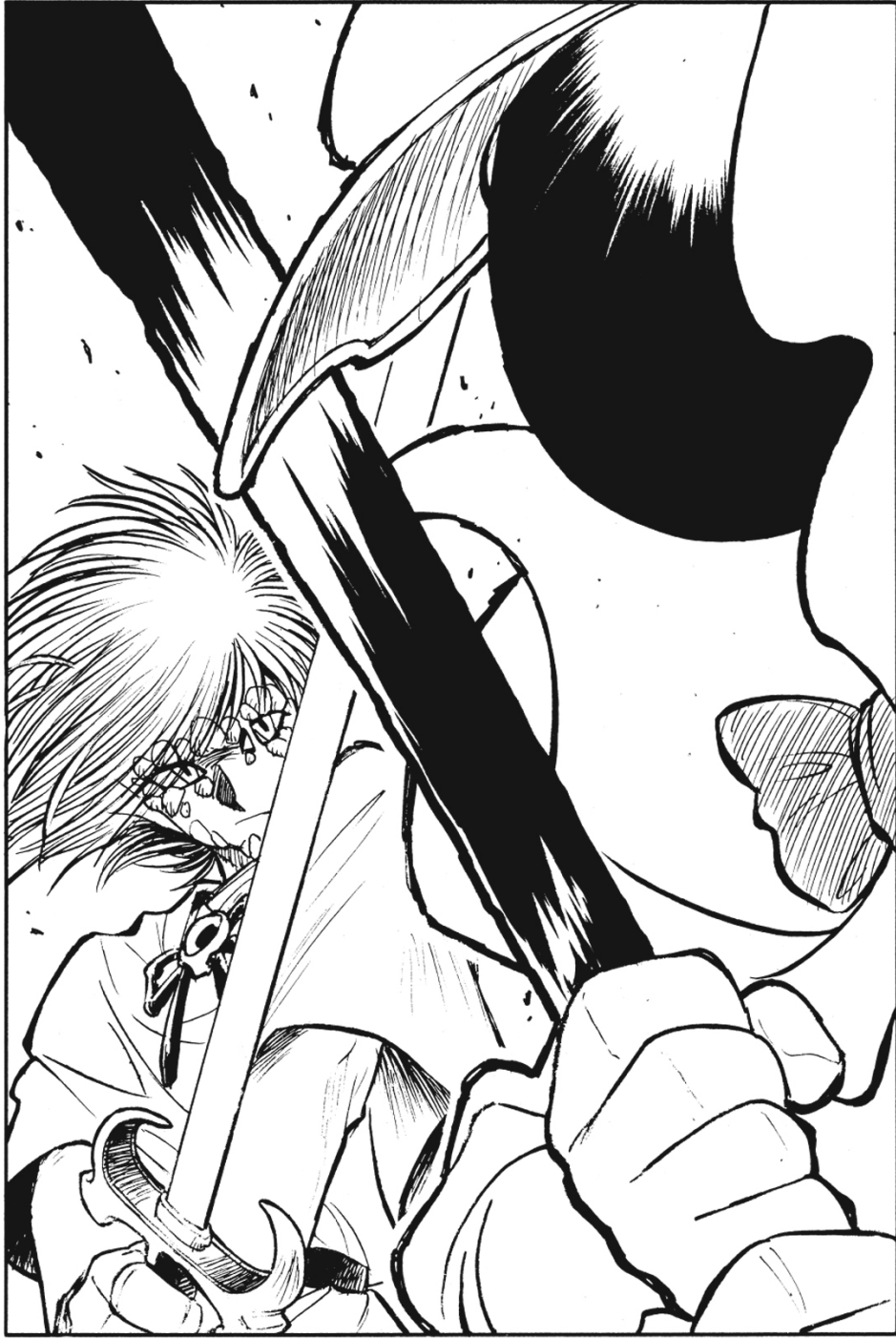
Duguld charged again. Zel had just readied his sword to meet him when...

Kraaah! A lesser demon unleashed a new volley of fire from behind Duguld! It shot forward indiscriminately, but simple Flare Arrows posed no threat to a pure demon like Duguld. He simply continued charging forward with the arrows at his back. But then, just before he reached his target, he sprang to the side! The fiery arrows behind him surged forward at Zel!

Zel leaped to the side after Duguld, but he was a hair too late. A single arrow of flame brushed by his left arm, turning the sleeve of his coat to ash. He then immediately had to contend with another storm of dark bullets from Duguld. He was completely on the defensive.

"Let us end this!" Duguld cried as the bullets that surrounded him coalesced in his hand. In an instant, they took the form of a black sword.

Shing! The very air trembled when Duguld's dark blade met Zel's magically infused broadsword. The two remained locked together, pitting strength against strength...



But, as if it had been waiting for this moment, a lesser demon on the sidelines conjured a mass of Flare Arrows.

Crap! There's no way Zel can dodge those right now!

It almost seemed as if the twisted being smiled slightly, and just then... *Vwoosh!* A ray of light streaked through the air, and its head went flying!

Attaboy, Gourry! One shot from his Sword of Light had cleanly decapitated the interloping demon.

As for Gourry, he seemed to have his hands full with the lesser demons himself. When he'd first leaped out of the cabin, he was dispatching them left and right—sometimes slicing through them with the Sword of Light, and sometimes shooting its blade from the hilt. That led a growing number of opponents, however, to concentrate their fire on him.

Their attacks weren't particularly coordinated, mind you, but there were an awful lot of them. Gourry was still managing to dodge or deflect each incoming arrow with the Sword of Light, but he was so occupied that he was hard pressed for opportunities to counterattack. Whenever he fired the Sword of Light's blade, there was a momentary but very real delay before it could manifest again. And one single defenseless second could mean the difference between life and death under this kind of fire. He'd managed to get off a shot to save Zel during a brief interlude between demon attacks, but such lucky breaks were few and far between.

"Argh!" Gourry cried out in panic as he knocked away another wave of fiery arrows.

Amelia didn't have as many lesser demons on her tail, but she was busy contending with a bigger problem...

"Heh heh heh... We meet again," Guduza hissed, her red slit of a mouth curling into the shape of a smile. Opposite her, Amelia was already chanting a spell. "I won't fail to kill you this time, child..."

Guduza's hair rippled. Simultaneously, the lesser demons around her unleashed a volley of Flare Arrows. Amelia dodged them all easily without dropping her chant. (This was around the time I was incanting my amplified light spell, if you're wondering.)

The smile carved into Guduza's face deepened. As it did, her hair elongated and disappeared into her shadow on the ground. What happened next was a repeat of the last time they'd fought—the demon's tendrils snaked up out of Amelia's shadow and twined around her legs. The main difference this time? The gaggle of lesser demons, of course!

"Take her, all of you!" Guduza called.

Graaagh! The lesser demons howled in response. Dozens of magical arrows appeared midair and rained down on the restrained Amelia.

Vroosh! The arrows all exploded in flame, and poor Amelia was... perfectly unharmed and chanting her next spell already?!

"A defense spell?!" Guduza gasped in surprise.

Amelia was originally a shrine maiden, so of course she knew defensive and recovery magic like the back of her hand. As long as she got her spell off in time, she'd have no trouble fending off a few measly lesser demon Flare Arrows.

"Curse you!" Guduza railed.

Her hair furiously slithered up Amelia's leg, but in that instant, Amelia finished her spell...

"Elemekia Lance!"

And she was targeting... her own feet? No, Guduza's hair! There was no way the demon could avoid it, and the spell blasted away her dark locks!

"Hyeek!" Guduza cried in shock as she quickly withdrew her hair from the shadow.

Even if her hair was as disposable as a lizard's tail, it was still part of her demonic body. It would've been one thing for her to sever it herself, but for it to be damaged while still attached to her... that *had* to hurt.

“Brat!” Guduza shrieked in rage.

Amelia ignored her and continued her chant while dashing straight at the demon!

“What are you fools doing?! Finish the girl off at once!” Guduza barked, ordering the lesser demons to conjure another wave of flaming arrows.

“Vis Farank!” Amelia shouted, incanting a spell I didn’t recognize.

At the same time, the lesser demons’ flaming arrows shot toward her. These guys were real one-trick ponies, but said one trick was still a serious threat in numbers like this. There was no way for Amelia to dodge them all! Would her defensive spell from earlier save her again?!

No, this was different! Amelia dodged most of the incoming arrows, and those she couldn’t dodge, she blocked with her left palm! *Vwim!* Their flames were extinguished like they had never been there.

Ah, of course! Amelia’s spell likely functioned on the same principle as Zel’s magic-infused sword—she was channeling magic power directly into her hands!

And with the spell still going, she kept closing the distance to Guduza!

“Foolish human!” the demon cried, her long, black hair streaming toward Amelia as if blown by the wind.

Vrrmmm... vrrmmm... Guduza’s outstretched hair trembled and thrummed like insect wings. The next instant...

Vrum! The vibrations became a magical shockwave that was rushing right for Amelia!

Crash! Four lesser demons fell to the ground, shaking the earth below. My shadow dragons had torn through spirit and flesh alike. And with their prey slain, they now slowly receded into my shadow.

Okay, four baddies down! It was a little more than a drop in the bucket, but it still didn’t do much to turn the tides of battle. If anything, it painted a bullseye on my forehead,

because a few other demons turned to me at once.

Not good... If I ran into the woods, I could break their line of sight on me. But on the other hand, if they just started firing indiscriminately because of it, I might end up walled in by fire and unable to escape. So while chanting a spell, I spun around and flew into the still-burning cabin instead. It hadn't collapsed yet, but it was one heck of an inferno inside. The superheated air scorched my skin.

I ran straight through the cabin and out the hole the Lanzards had used to escape. This was a pretty simple diversion, but I figured it'd be enough to fool the less-than-brilliant lesser demons. As soon as I was outside and flying into the treeline...

Vwoosh! A massive tongue of fire rose up and brought the whole cabin down. The demons who'd seen me dash into it had launched their flaming arrows at the burning building. Seeing this, I spun around again and ran back toward the fray.

"Blast Ash!" *Frrmmm!* There was a rumbling sound that I could feel in my very gut, and two more lesser demons turned to black dust in an instant.

Six down! Between me and the gang, that made about fourteen defeated in total. We were certainly mowing 'em down, but there were still over half of the original numbers remaining. A full-power Dragon Slave could have put an easy end to things, but that would've caught Gourry and the others in the blast too. That left me no choice but to target the suckers one by one.

Okay, what spell should I throw at 'em next?

Just as I was about to begin my next chant, I sensed someone behind me and whipped around. It was Abel, who was standing there glassy-eyed.

"What are you—?!" I grabbed his hand and pulled him deep into the underbrush. It was clear something had happened, but not even I was gutsy enough to stand around talking with lesser demons chucking spells willy-nilly. "What

happened? Where's your father?!"

"We tried to run into the forest... but a demon threw a fire arrow at us... Dad pushed me away and told me to run... I haven't seen him since! I've been searching all over, but..."

Great! As if I don't have enough to worry about...

"Your dad's okay! I promise!" I said, completely baselessly. "Once the battle's over, we'll look for him together! For now, stay put!"

There, I picked up a new chant and went to rejoin the battle. The moment I came out of the underbrush, however, I found myself face-to-face with a lesser demon. *Ack!*

"Dynast Breath!" I incanted, freezing and shattering the monstrous creature instantly.

The blade in Duguld's hand was changing color, going from a deep black to gray. His dark sword, an amalgamation of his shadowy bullets, apparently wasn't as powerful as Gourry's Sword of Light or my Ragna Blade, so the constant clashing with Zel's enchanted sword was rapidly stripping it of its power. That said, Zel's magical sword seemed to be degrading at a similar pace, so victory would come down to whoever's weapon lasted longer. But it seemed Duguld had no interest in a war of attrition...

"You lose, chimera child!" he declared, producing another dozen bullets around his body!

If he unleashed those at this range, Zel wouldn't be able to dodge! Yet the next moment... it was Duguld leaping back with a scream. I looked and saw a dagger buried deep in his body, almost to the hilt.

"Gwaaagh! Gaaagh!" he wailed and writhed as he yanked it out with his right hand and tossed it aside in disgust.

Obviously, no mere dagger was enough to harm a pure demon... Zel must have cast his spell a second time, infusing the hidden blade in his left hand while fending off Duguld with his right. He then thrust it in when he had the chance.

Not about to miss the opening he'd created, Zel leaped at

Duguld. A lesser demon moved to intercept him, but Zel seemed to have accounted for that. He confidently sliced through the creature, changed direction, and slaughtered another on the way.

“Absurd chimera!” Duguld shouted angrily, his voice tinged with pain. “How dare you... How dare you do this to me?!”

But Zelgadis laughed off his words: “For someone who looks down on children and chimeras, you’re very predictable. Shallow fool.”

“How dare you?! This time, I’ll kill you for sure!”

“Many have said that to me... and no one’s ever managed to follow through,” Zelgadis scoffed as he began a chant.

Despite the demon’s blustering, the blow must have done him considerable damage. Duguld’s movements seemed sluggish and uncertain now.

“Tch...” The pure demon clicked his tongue softly and leaped back toward a lesser demon. “That... That certainly did hurt, but...”

Duguld then quietly raised his right hand and—*Bwush!*—speared it through the lesser demon’s chest as it wailed a nasty death rattle.

What the?!

“Heh... heh heh...” Duguld let out a low laugh as the creature’s black blood sprayed his body. “Ahh... that hit the spot... Such anger and fear...”

Holy crap! Demons drew their power from the negative emotions of living beings. So to heal himself, Duguld had killed one of his minions in order to feed off its distress and despair. Even if it was corporeal, fundamentally unlike a pure demon like him... didn’t that still basically amount to cannibalism?

“Now...” Thus recovered from Zel’s blow, Duguld summoned more dark bullets around him. “I let my guard down just now, but next time...”

Zelgadis drew back swiftly as he continued his chant.

Wait, that spell...

"A Ra Tilt?!" Duguld exclaimed, also seeming to recognize it.

Vwip... Duguld's body sank to the earth, leaving his bullets of darkness hanging in the air. This was the same tactic Guduza had used against Amelia—the "lizard's tail" maneuver that left a fragment of their astral form as a decoy while their main body escaped.

By the time Zel finished his chant, Duguld's true form had already disappeared into the ground. That forced him to find a new target. He could probably finish off Duguld if he waited for him to reappear, but the lesser demons weren't exactly going to let him stand around and do that. Also, now that the chant was complete, he couldn't hold on to it forever.

For a minute, Zel glanced over at Amelia, who was currently locked in close combat with Guduza. Ra Tilt was a single-target spell, of course, but there was no telling what might happen to someone touched by the blue pillar of light once fired. So, left with little other choice, Zel turned and released the Ra Tilt on a nearby lesser demon.

Vwoosh! Swallowed by a column of blue light, the lesser demon slumped immediately to the ground. It felt like a waste of a spell, but I guess it was better than nothing...

Then, as if he'd planned for this, Duguld leaped out from the forest underbrush. Had he reappeared in the forest and lain in wait for Zel to unleash his spell?!

"It was all for nothing, chimera child!"

Duguld was already armed with a fresh swarm of bullets. Meanwhile, Zel had just fired off a spell, and the magic he'd infused his sword with was almost spent! With no recourse, he leaped away from the demon, chanting all the while.

"You can't escape!" Duguld cried, letting his black bullets fly.

"Hah!" Amelia shouted out.

She then used the magic in her right hand to repel Guduza's incoming shockwave. *Bwoosh!* Two invisible powers collided, causing the wind to swirl and howl. And when it died down...

"Ngh..." Amelia groaned. It seemed she hadn't offset Guduza's attack entirely. Her legs were trembling a little.

"Pin the girl down!" Guduza cried as she rushed toward Amelia.

Responding to her command, the lesser demons nearby fired Flare Arrows to cut off Amelia's escape routes. Herded by the flaming arrows behind her, Amelia was forced to charge at Guduza again, still chanting.

Not good... Stopping the earlier magical shockwave would have extinguished the magic infused in her hands, meaning that she was now charging in with no way to attack Guduza—and worse yet, no way to defend! Amelia must have realized that, because right before she reached Guduza, she leaped to the side!

Guduza seemed to anticipate this move, however, for her black tendrils ensnared Amelia as she jumped!

"You won't get away this time!" she hissed.

One of her locks was wrapped around Amelia's neck! Was she going to strangle her to keep her from casting?!

Yet before the tressed garrote could completely cut off her windpipe, Amelia cast her eyes away in a sidelong glance at something. Guduza, curious as to what, likewise turned that way... to see Zelgadis searching out a target for his primed Ra Tilt after Duguld had disappeared.

Recognizing the danger of the attack, Guduza seized up in fear. Zel, however, quickly turned away and unleashed the spell on a lesser demon instead. Relieved, Guduza turned back to her target...

But that was all the time Amelia had needed to finish her spell: "Vis Farank!"

"No!" Guduza cried, yet it was too late.

Bwoom!

“Graaah!” The demon let out a shrill wail as Amelia slammed a magic-infused fist into her stomach, but such a blow wasn’t enough to kill her. “You...”

Enraged by the attack, Guduza tightened her hair around Amelia’s neck. Amelia gasped for air with a pained expression—but that didn’t stop her from brandishing her fist again! *Wham!*

“Graaah!” Guduza wailed louder as her fury grew and her locks coiled tighter.

Pop! Amelia’s right knee snapped. Guduza cracked a slight grin—which Amelia promptly smashed in with her fist!

“Hreek!” the demon yowled.

It would be no exaggeration to say Guduza’s face was her true self. A blow directly to it was apparently so painful that she immediately released Amelia, who swiftly leaped back.

My girl was in a bad way herself, though. She slumped to her knees, gasping for breath.

Seeing its chance, one of the lesser demons turned toward her and...

Slash!

In that instant, its upper body was liberated from its lower half by Gourry’s Sword of Light.

“Gaav Flare!” *Vwoom!* The red streak I fired finished off another two lesser demons.

That made... nineteen total! We were whittling them down pretty nicely, with Gourry being our real MVP. He’d picked up the pace, shaving down the demons’ numbers and breaking up their flaming arrow barrages.

Situations like this really made me appreciate how skilled Gourry was. He was steadily dishing it out to the enemy while still managing to cover for his allies. At this rate, it was only a matter of time until all the lesser demons were destroyed, but Zel and Amelia were still locked in hard fights, and an even greater concern hung over me...

Brr! A chill ran up my spine, sending me leaping

backward from where I stood. I then turned back around toward the forest... Soon, with a rustle of leaves, a black-clad figure appeared.

What?!

“Zuma!”

Dude’s got impeccable timing, doesn’t he?! At least, now that he was here, I didn’t have to worry about him showing up... I quickly launched into a spell. To be honest, I was way more scared of this one guy than a hundred lesser demons!

Whoosh! Zuma sprinted forward, cutting through the grass. He was coming straight for me!

“Fireball!” I incanted. Zuma easily dodged the ball of light I threw. But the moment it sailed by him, I snapped my fingers! “Break!”

Fwoom! The ball of light burst, casting crimson flame everywhere. This was my modified version of the spell, and I was sure I’d nailed him good with it.

Nevertheless, Zuma had once taken a Fireball from me undaunted... Dude must’ve had some powerful defensive spells in his arsenal. Meaning, of course, there was no guarantee my Fireball special had finished him off.

So instead of letting my guard down, I began chanting my next spell—one he wouldn’t be able to block! And, just as I expected, a dark silhouette emerged from the flames a second later, bolting straight toward me!

I’d only just begun my chant. I had no choice but to leap back, pull out the knife I used for Shadow Snap, and throw it at Zuma. I was hoping he might mistake the spell I was incanting for a Shadow Snap and stop, but... He didn’t just ignore it; he actually picked up speed!

He then snatched the knife I’d thrown out of the air and tossed it back at me! Right at my freaking head!

Shocked, I dropped low. I shouldn’t have let it rattle me like that, though; it made me lose my balance and tumble backward.

Fwish! At least the knife passed safely over my head, but

now I had to get back on my feet! I couldn't just sit around on my butt with Zuma speeding at me! I had my spell, but...

Ugh, it's not ready yet!

I was going to have to risk kicking him or something! I was liable to end up with a broken foot for my trouble, but there was no way in hell I could shake him if I tried to run. Even if it was a losing battle, I was gonna have to put up my dukes!

But just as I steeled my nerve, Zuma stopped in his tracks. A flash passed in front of his eyes—the Sword of Light! Zuma quietly turned his gaze on its wielder...

"It's been a while," Gourry said, the Sword of Light at his side. Naturally, Zuma had no reply. "Lina, you take care of the demons! I'll hold him off!"

"Got it!" I called, standing up.

Yeah, call me coward if you want, but I couldn't see any reason to stand on pride here. I was just gonna trip Gourry up if I stuck around. So, while chanting a spell, I set my sights on the remaining lesser demons instead.

With the Sword of Light in one hand, Gourry slowly inched closer to the assassin. He definitely had the advantage in this matchup. Zuma's typical moves—parrying blades and catching them with both hands to snap them in two—wouldn't work against the Sword of Light. Zuma had magic on his side, but no time to chant while dodging Gourry.

"Hah!" the blond lug cried, running straight for the assassin.

Zuma leaped back instantly and shouted, "Flare Arrow!" Right on cue, close to twenty bolts of flame appeared in front of him and shot toward Gourry!

"More fire arrows?!" Gourry complained, but readily evaded or blocked them all without losing speed.

Zuma then charged forward to meet him, as if following the arrows. The two fighters crossed paths. Gourry swung the Sword of Light, and...

Crackle!

Zuma, unbelievably enough, stopped the strike with his left palm! Like Amelia, he must've channeled magic power into his hand to use as a shield, but damn!

When did he learn that spell?!

While blocking with his left palm, Zuma thrust his right out at Gourry!

"Tch!" Gourry, wary of the attack, quickly sprang back to escape it.

The two fighters, now some distance apart, squared off once more.

Kicking up dust, Zel slid behind the lesser demon that had fallen nearby. *Pop-pop-pop!* A second later, Duguld's dark bullets peppered the corpse with holes.

"Fool! You think you can hide from me?!" Duguld cried and leaped at him. He bounded over the demon's body to attack Zelgadis from above, but...

Vrsh! A silver flash tore through the air between them!

"Graaagh!" Duguld cried out as he fell to the ground.

That same instant, Zel stood up from behind the lesser demon. He must have renewed his spell, because the broadsword in his hand was again aglow with crimson light.

"You're the fool here!" he spat, dashing at Duguld.

Zwoosh! Zelgadis slashed at the demon's torso just as he got to his feet.

"Graaagh!" Duguld screamed again, but didn't fall this time. "Gngh..."

With groans of agony, he instead pulled a protruding dagger from his breast... Another magic-infused one, most likely.

"Did you think I only had one dagger? I can't believe you fell for the same trick twice... For all your big talk, you demons really are simple!" Zel scoffed, throwing all the demon's mockery back in his face.

It would be hard for Duguld to make a comeback given his current position. Almost all of the lesser demons were dead

now, and the remaining ones were currently concentrated on me. He wouldn't be able to heal himself the same way again.

"Damn you... Damn you!" But the pure demon hadn't yet lost his will to fight. "I'll kill you! I *will* kill you!" he howled, taking off in a spring with his cape flapping behind him.

Amelia stood up shakily, muttering a chant. She didn't look steady on her feet at all.

"I'll... finish you now..." Guduza wheezed.

Both of them were seriously worse for wear, but Amelia charged again! Guduza's hair rippled!

"Vis Farank!" Amelia incanted, channeling magic into her hands for a third time.

Frshh! Guduza's hair snatched one of her infused hands. Their respective magics fought each other, causing some of Guduza's hair to shrivel.

"Graah!" the demon shrieked, yet she forced her hair to wrap further around Amelia. Perhaps she was prepared to take some damage if it meant depleting the magic in Amelia's hands?

Her hair eventually wound its way around Amelia's entire body. But rather than giving up, my girl began chanting her next spell.

"I wonder what would happen if I unleashed the magic from my hair right now," Guduza mused with a small laugh. Even Amelia was taken aback by the suggestion. "This will be my first time trying it!"

Vmmm!

The demon's tendrils thrummed again like an insect's wings. Amelia wordlessly jerked back, and...

"Graaaaaaaaah!" Guduza wailed with a deathly clamor, for protruding from her head was now... Duguld's right hand!

"D... Duguld..."

As she hissed her compatriot's name, her black tresses went limp and melted into darkness. Amelia, mustering her will, began chanting her next spell even as she slumped to

the ground.

“Do pardon me, but I really must kill that pathetic little chimera now!” Duguld said, his voice oozing hatred. “So, Guduza, I’m afraid this means... I’ll be borrowing what power you have remaining!”

Holy crap! This guy didn’t just prey on lesser demons! He was gonna consume Guduza too?! I guess Zel had really gotten his goat!

“D... Damn you...” Guduza tried to curse the demon she’d assumed was an ally, but her voice quickly faded on the wind.

Shff... Her face crumbled into motes of black ash that were summarily blown away.

“Not enough...” Duguld’s body lurched to the side. He then cast his gaze toward Zelgadis. “I still don’t have... enough power!”

Zel really must have done a number on him earlier, because even after devouring the weakened Guduza, the pure demon wasn’t completely revived. And in his compromised state, an attack came from behind...

“Elemekia Lance!”

“Gah!” Duguld screamed, turning around. “You... Damn... you!”

The spell was none other than Amelia’s doing, and—*Slash!*—it was quickly followed up by a strike across the demon’s back from Zel!

“...!”

That one did it. Duguld didn’t even have time to let out a final howl as his body turned to black sand, which fell into a pile on the ground.

“I think that does it...” Zel remarked.

“Yeah. For us, anyway,” Amelia replied with a small smile.

Whoosh! Zuma leaped up into the air! Gourry fired a blast from the Sword of Light at the high-flying assassin, but Zuma used the magic concentrated in his left hand to knock

it away. He then thrust his right hand out in a counterattack.

“Ngh!” Gourry reformed his brilliant blade just in time to deflect the blow.

“Dark Mist!” Zuma hissed, unleashing his next spell.

Dang! I didn't even catch him chanting that one!

Zuma's magic shrouded the area in darkness. It had no offensive power, but it reduced visibility to zero. Gourry disappeared into the umbra for a moment... then immediately leaped out of it with his sword at the ready to meet the assassin.

But what came at him next wasn't Zuma! *Voosh!* It was a magical shockwave speeding toward his flank!

After using Dark Mist to escape Gourry's sight, Zuma had somehow changed course midair and struck from the side. Perhaps hearing the roar of the wind, or maybe just on instinct, Gourry pegged the incoming attack and slashed at it!

Vrrsh! A high cry echoed out of the air. The Sword of Light had easily bisected Zuma's magical shockwave.

Zuma charged regardless. Gourry readied the Sword of Light, but just before Zuma entered melee range... he swung his right hand in a sweeping gesture.

Another magic shockwave?!

“What?!” Gourry gasped.

He was too close to dodge it. With no other choice, he sliced through this one with the Sword of Light too.

But Zuma took advantage of the distraction and charged in! Was he going to block Gourry's sword with one hand and attack with the other again? Realizing that was likely the case, Gourry twisted his hand holding the sword ninety degrees and fired the blade at Zuma point blank. Either his aim was off or Zuma had anticipated the move, however, because the sly assassin twisted lightly to dodge the attack by a hair's breadth.

Zuma then reached out for Gourry's neck with his right hand, but Gourry retreated a bit and retaliated with a kick to

Zuma's gut. The assassin leaped back and landed without a single grunt or complaint.

"Flare Arrow!" Now that he'd finished Duguld, Zelgadis had been waiting for a chance to jump in—and he took the opportunity to fire a spell from the sidelines. Not even Zuma would be able to dodge this! No, instead...

Crash! With a sweep of his right hand, Zuma extinguished the incoming flaming arrows!

"Impossible!" Zel cried in shock, freezing to a halt.

"Out of my way!" Zuma cried, releasing a magic shockwave from his right hand that hit Zel straight on!

No way!

"Ngh!" Zelgadis was blown back.

At this point, I'd just about polished off the last of the lesser demons.

"Amelia! Heal Zel up!" I advised while working on a chant of my own.

I turned toward where Zuma and Gourry were still duking it out. Amelia and Zel had both taken quite a beating already. Neither one of them was in any condition to contend with the assassin.

But his attack patterns... They look a little like...

One way or another, I was gonna have to lend a hand myself! After Gourry and Zuma took some distance from each other, I unleashed my spell.

"Zellas Bullid!"

This was a little number I'd cooked up recently that required the talismans to use. Its power was roughly on par with my Dynast Blas and Ragna Blast... and, yup, it even worked on demons. It was single-target only, but what really set it apart was that its movement could be controlled at will. In other words, it couldn't be dodged or blocked. Not by any human, at least.

Responding to my words of power, the ray of light that appeared at my fingertips streaked toward Zuma. Sensing

something, the assassin reflexively moved to dodge. But responding to my thoughts instantaneously, the beam of light changed course to pursue! Gourry, wary of being used as an enemy shield, leaped away from Zuma.

Meanwhile, the assassin chanted a spell under his breath. It had a familiar ring to it.

I knew it! Cold sweat beaded all over my body. At the same time, seeming to finish his spell, Zuma stopped in his tracks. The ray of light I shot at him struck...

Kriiing! And it let out a sharp whine as it shattered to pieces. Zuma stood there in its wake, unfazed.

He'd blocked it... and so easily...

"Zuma... You..." I said, my voice harsh. "You fused with Seigram, didn't you?!"

"Yes..." came a voice from beneath the assassin's cloth mask. It was clearly that of the faceless demon. "I had lost most of my power, and this man had lost both of his arms—all to the two of you. I sensed his consciousness and made him an offer... 'Do you wish to regain what you lost?'"



At last, it all made sense. Why, when we crossed swords in Vezendi, "Seigram the Faceless" had been wearing his mask again. Why he'd fled just because it was broken... It was to conceal his identity as Zuma. This also explained why Zuma had been doing such uncharacteristic things, and why Seigram's attack patterns had changed.

"I swore I'd finish you someday," the assassin hissed in Seigram's voice. "That's what I told you when we last parted ways. But the damage inflicted by that sword is slow to recover... And so I fused with this man at the cost of my demonic form."

He'd abandoned his demonic nature just to get revenge on me and Gourry?!

"Then what? You used Raltark as a go-between to call some of your demon buddies and challenge us to another fight? What exactly is *their* game, huh?"

"That's more than you need to know. You're going to die soon anyway," he said, this time in Zuma's voice.

He was coming! Zuma flew across the ground, headed our way. Gourry moved to intercept him.

We had to be careful here! Zuma didn't need casting time unless it was a big spell. I, meanwhile, began chanting anew.

Zuma's first target was Gourry. Not even this demon-assassin fusion could handle both Gourry's Sword of Light and my magic at the same time. He released another magic shockwave, but Gourry sliced right through it. He then leaped into the air and threw a second one down at Gourry from above.

"Gwuh?!"

Surprised, Gourry positioned the Sword of Light above him, but the angle was awkward and it took all he had to block the incoming attack. Zuma dove down upon him and, just as they collided, a ball of magic appeared in his left hand that extended toward the Sword of Light!

Now's my chance!

"Elemekia Lance!" I incanted, hurling my magic javelin.

Not even Zuma could dodge this time. That sucker nailed him head-on!

Still, it wasn't enough to stop him. *Crackle!* His magic and Gourry's brilliant blade collided. Zuma used their fulcrum to pivot, shifting his momentum into a kick aimed at Gourry!

"What?!" Gourry leaped back in a panic. Zuma's kick had grazed his chest...

Or so I thought. But a dull crack rang out, and Gourry's breastplate split open! Had he done it with his claws?!

"No!" Gourry cried in shock.

The sundered breastplate only slowed him down for a second, but that was all Zuma needed. *Wham!* Another magic shockwave hit Gourry dead on and sent him flying back.

"Gourry!"

Perhaps hearing my voice, he moved ever so slightly. It seemed like he was trying to get up, but the damage he'd taken must have been severe. All he could do was writhe.

Zuma, on the other hand, wasn't down for the count, though my Elemekia Lance must have done a number on him too. He looked unsteady on his feet.

"I'll finish this now," he whispered... but was that the assassin's voice or the demon's?

"Stop!" came a cry from the forest, halting me and Zuma from leaping at each other.

Argh! Why did you have to come out now?!

"Please... enough..." Abel appeared before us, speaking in a whisper. Zuma stared at him silently. "Please... enough already! Why do you have to kill them?"

After a long pause, Zuma turned his gaze from Abel back to me.

"Tell me, Dad!" he continued.

Huh? Abel's choice of words made my mind go blank.

"Dad"? *Wait...*

There, the assassin looked back to Abel once more.

"How... How did you know?" he asked in the livid voice of

Laddock Lanzard.

"Because... you're my father! Aren't you?!" Abel cried on the verge of tears.

Laddock—now the demon-fused Zuma—simply averted his gaze without a word.

I should've known! Using a target as bait to call us out, taking hostages... None of that was Zuma's style, but this explained everything. He'd used *himself* as bait, taken *himself* hostage! He'd even written that threatening letter to himself. And once he finished me off, he surely planned to go back to his "normal" life, blustering around about how he'd merely been a pawn in the whole affair. The reason he'd been so short with us from the start was to mask his deeper hatred for us.

It also seemed Abel had vaguely intuited that Laddock was working as a killer on the side. That was why he'd come down on us so hard in an attempt to drive us away from the house.

"Pray, Abel..." the assassin said in his father's voice. "Pray that Lina Inverse wins... If she doesn't, I will have to kill you..."

"Why?" The question came from me this time. "Why can't you just be a merchant and live an honest life? Why do you have to sneak around in the shadows as Zuma the assassin?"

"I wish... I wish I knew," he replied with a slight shake of his head. "Anything I tried to say would simply be an excuse. This is the only way I know how to live. That's all..."

I felt goosebumps rise all over my skin. I quickly started chanting a spell.

"Let's begin," he said once more in the cold voice of an assassin.

I broke into a mad dash toward Gourry. Zuma had demonstrated that normal spells had no effect on him. He could even block more powerful ones with his human magic techniques and demonic capacity. I wasn't totally sure a

Dragon Slave would do the trick at this point, seeing as how that didn't work against the last human-demon fusion I'd fought.

That meant there was only one way to win this: to finish things in close combat before Zuma recovered from my Elemekia Lance. In other words, the odds were against me.

"The Sword of Light?! I don't think so!" he cried out, moving to block my way. He was significantly slower now, but he was still considerably fleet of foot.

Ugh! I'll just have to risk it! I'd already finished my chant.

"Ragna Blade!" I shouted, manifesting a blade of darkness in my hand! Seigram and Zuma shouldn't know this move! If it hit...

"What?!" he cried in shock, producing magic in both palms and blocking my blade of darkness with his left!

Not good! I knew his next move. If he thrust his right hand at me now, I genuinely didn't think I could dodge it. But...

"Gwaaagh!" Zuma was the one who suddenly withdrew, screaming in pain.

My black blade had cut through the magic he'd conjured in his palm—and his hand right along with it! It seemed he'd never expected my spell to have such power. And, if I'm being honest, neither had I. Was my Ragna Blade actually stronger than the Sword of Light?!

Whoosh! Zuma twisted around and rushed along the ground. He was... He was going for Gourry!

No way! You've gotta be kidding me! Is he after...

I quickly gave chase, but I didn't stand a chance of catching up to him. Zuma was almost instantly on top of Gourry, who was trying to pick himself up.

Whump! Gourry took a kick to the side and went rolling with a groan. Zuma then crouched down... Would I reach them in time?! I leaped forward, bringing my dark sword down on the assassin's back!

Fweeeeen! A shrill cry rang through the air. Indeed, Zuma

had just barely managed to block my black blade... with the Sword of Light in his right hand!

Naturally, fueled by the capacity of a demon, the Sword of Light was still blindingly strong. A blade of light produced by darkness, and a blade of darkness produced by man... They struggled against each other.

Which of us was forced to withdraw first? I couldn't say for sure, but Zuma and I both took our distance and stared each other down. His left hand was worthless now, and he was probably pretty spent... But my Ragna Blade was also draining my magic at a frightening pace. Every moment we stood here, I could feel my exhaustion mounting. If this went on for too long, I was done for.

"I'll finish this... with my next strike!" I declared.

"Just try it!" Zuma responded.

With that, I ran! I ran with my black blade held high. Zuma rushed forward to meet me. He heaved the Sword of Light aloft... and then he stopped.

Slash! When he did, my blade of darkness sliced through the assassin's stomach.

"Dad!" Abel cried and ran over to Zuma... no, to Laddock Lanzard as he collapsed on the ground. "Dad! Dad!" he shouted as he shook his father's body.

I dismissed my blade of darkness and glanced at the two of them. At last, the man's eyes opened slightly.

"Dad!" Abel shouted again.

"Laugh at me... Lina Inverse..." But the voice that came from his father's mouth was that of Seigram the Faceless. "I fused with a human to defeat you two... and in the end... this human heart was my undoing..."

That's right... When I sliced through him with my Ragna Blade, it wasn't me he was looking at. It was his son, Abel Lanzard. What was Laddock thinking in that moment? It was too late to ask.

"Go ahead... laugh," he said once more before his arms fell limply at his side.

Abel looked at me accusingly, but said nothing. All I could do was bow my head.

Following that, we escorted Abel back to Vezendi City. He spent most of the trip in silence, but from the fragments of conversation he did offer up...

Apparently Laddock had genuinely loved traveling. But at some point, Abel had started to sense something strange was afoot with his father. That was probably when it had all started... When Laddock first took the name Zuma and stepped into the darkness as an assassin.

Why had he done it? We would never know.

He'd allegedly met Raltark on a business trip and brought the old butler home with him not long ago. That had only increased Abel's suspicions, but before he could question his father about it... we showed up and the rest was history.

Abel disappeared into the crowds of Vezendi once we reached the city gate. He'd solemnly offered to pay us for services rendered, but I'd turned him down. I wish I could tell you why.

"You think he'll be okay?" Amelia whispered.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," I responded confidently.

"But I have to ask..." Zel chimed in with a sidelong glance at Xellos. "Just what were *you* doing this whole time?!"

Yep, the mysterious priest was still rolling with us.

"Oh, well... hahaha." Xellos scratched at his head and dodged the question with a laugh.

"In that battle, too, you didn't show up until the fighting was over..."

"Well... I was struck by one of those lesser demons, and I fell unconscious in the bushes. Hahaha."

"Unbelievable..."

Zel seemed to let it go there, so I was guessing I was the only one who'd heard Xellos's voice when he saved me at the beginning of the fight.

"By the way, Lina," Gourry piped up, "what happened to

that Raltark guy?"

"Dunno," I answered bluntly. We'd lost sight of him in the chaos and hadn't seen him since.

"You don't know? You mean..."

"I'm sure he'll come after us again eventually, whether we like it or not. But more importantly..." I said, trying to make myself sound cheerful. "Let's get back on our way to Dils!"

Epilogue

The night wind carried the faint scent of greenery.

If this were a large city, there would have still been raucous merrymaking going on in the bar on the first floor of the inn. But as I slipped out, there were no customers in sight. There wasn't even anyone behind the counter.

Of course, that was to be expected out here in the sticks.

The gang and I were currently taking a back road to the Kingdom of Dils. This was the only inn in a town we'd stopped at along the way, and we were the only patrons I'd seen at the place. According to the man who ran the joint, it was more unusual for them to have customers than not.

How does he make a living, then? I wondered as I slipped out of my room and made my way outside.

I then wandered around the building. Obviously, I wasn't going bandit bullying tonight. I was waiting for someone... and I didn't have to wait long.

"Out for a stroll?" he called by the time I'd made it behind the inn.



The alleyway was shrouded in shadows cast by fencing, various carts, and piles of nondescript wooden crates.

"No..." I said quietly, shaking my head. "I was waiting for you, Xellos."

"Oh?" The priest, dressed not unlike the shadows, reclined on the fence. "Why might that be?"

"I wanted to thank you for something. Tentatively, anyway."

"Thank me?"

"Yes. After all was said and done, I think I finally figured out what you were doing."

"And what's that?"

"Holding back Raltark... And testing me, I think."

"Oho..." Xellos responded in amusement before disappearing into the darkness. "And when did you realize it?" When I turned toward his voice again, I found him sitting atop the pile of wooden crates, his back to the moon. "That I was a demon, I mean."

"More or less from day one, I think," I said, a small smile on my face.

"Mazenda sealed my magic... which isn't something a human should be capable of. I know, because I've studied it. So given how easily you defeated her, you're clearly no ordinary human."

"Ah... I suppose the jig was up from the start then, hahaha," he laughed with his trademark airy unconcern. "You are indeed correct. Miss Mazenda was a demon like myself."

"Yet you killed her, which suggests you've got your own business going on. That Raltark guy didn't seem to be on your side either."

"Now... that's a secret," he said, holding his finger up over his lips in the usual fashion.

If Xellos were just any human, I would've forced answers out of him... but unfortunately, I knew I couldn't beat him. Not *yet*, anyway.

“But... yes, for now, I told Master Raltark that I wouldn’t reveal his identity if, in exchange, he wouldn’t reveal mine. Sort of a non-interference agreement... though it seems I had nothing to be worried about with you.”

“Well, I don’t think the others have caught on yet.”

“Master Gourry especially, I would assume.”

“Well, that’s the kind of guy he is...” I replied with a wry grin. “I’m pretty sure Zel and Amelia know there’s something weird about you, but I don’t think they’ve puzzled it out quite far enough to pin down the ‘demon’ part. By the way, Xellos, is that your real name?”

“I am Xellos the Priest... in service to Greater Beast Zellas Metallium. Though I’m on other business at the moment,” he said, matching my wry smile. “Originally, I was tasked with destroying the manuscripts. If chimeras like the one we encountered that night were produced in mass quantities... it would be one thing for fellow demons of my power, but my lower-ranking kin will be in considerable trouble. And, of course, the manuscript fragments are mere fragments—flawed fractions of the real thing. Otherwise, humans should have been able to control that chimera, you see. Something similar is true for the record in the Kingdom of Dils...”

“?!” I gasped reflexively. “You mean about the Lord of Nightmares?!”

Xellos flashed a rare grimace in response to my statement. “Please do not say that name so brazenly!” he barked. “A demon of my station is unworthy to hear it.”

Was it really that big of a deal? I’d always figured “the Lord of Nightmares” was just the strongest of the dark lords, but...

“At any rate, when I burned that last manuscript and reported back to Greater Beast... That’s when I was given my current assignment.”

“To keep an eye on me, you mean?”

“Let’s say... to protect and guide you, though I fear I cannot go into any further detail.”

“Wait a minute. You mean you sold me these amplification talismans *before* you were assigned to protect me?!”

“Of course.”

“Why would you sell something so powerful to someone who was a nobody to you at the time?”

“Ah, well...” A pained smile crossed Xellos’s face as he scratched at his cheek. “I suppose I was simply swept up in the moment.”

Man, what a weirdo...

“If I’m being honest, however, I had no desire to take part in this plan. Hellmaster spearheaded it, you see. I know that Hellmaster’s servants were destroyed in the Incarnation War a thousand years ago and he has none of his own now, but still... As Zellas’s priest, I don’t care for the treatment. I hope you won’t take offense, but being stuck protecting you... a mere human...”

“And that’s why you tested me. To see if I was worthy of all the fuss.”

I recalled Xellos’s scolding the night Zuma appeared: *You really should be able to defeat an opponent of such mettle yourself...* That must have been a challenge to me.

He nodded firmly.

“So? Did I pass?” I asked next.

“Candidly, I’m slightly less than satisfied... but with your latent potential and the help of your friends, I’d say you managed to scrape by.”

I couldn’t help but wince.

“By the way...” Xellos continued, his smile as broad as ever. “What do you plan to do now that you’ve confirmed I’m a demon? Force a reckoning?”

“Let’s see...” I thought for a minute. “I’ll probably keep it secret from the others for a while.”

“Oh?” Xellos hummed in amusement.

“I don’t like being manipulated,” I declared, thrusting a finger out at him, “but for now I don’t have a lot of choice in the matter. So go ahead and do your worst, I say. Except

that'll only fly if your identity stays a secret for now, right?"

"Much obliged," Xellos said with brazen calm. "But if that's how you truly feel, why confront me about it in the first place? Wouldn't it have been more to your advantage to play dumb?"

"I wanted to clarify what's going on around me. I also wanted you to know that you aren't really manipulating me; I'm letting myself be manipulated. I know it's really six of one, half a dozen of the other, but still... It just annoys me, y'know?"

"I see." Xellos nodded, his smile turning strained. "I heard you were no ordinary human... and I see now how true that is."

"Is that a compliment?"

"The highest flattery there is. At least, for a demon speaking to a human."

"So... where are we supposed to go next?"

"Ah, yes. Let us carry on..." Xellos gestured with the staff in his hand toward the moon in the western sky. "We shall proceed to the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Dils... where the original Claire Bible lies."

Afterword

Scene: Subordinate S

Bonsoir, everyone! A pleasure to meet those of you joining us for the first time with the reprints! I'm L-sama's subordinate, S! I occasionally hosted the afterwords in the old versions and helped kill off the author! That said, I haven't gotten the chance to be involved in the afterwords lately. My boss is always saying, "Since you don't have anything better to do..." and sending me on retrieval quests while picking up tickets on the way. And then I come back to constant explosive mining! But these mundane tasks have finally earned me recognition! At last, I've won this honor from my boss! And as a result, I've been given this afterword all to myself!

[Fanfare interlude.]

I hired a band to play the fanfare, and I even had an outfit tailor-made for the occasion! This is all out of my own pocket, obviously, but I consider it a small price to pay for a prestigious duty like handling an afterword! Now, to kick things off and commemorate this afterword entrusted to my care, I will hereby read a letter L-sama left for me!

[The sound of an envelope being opened.]

A-Ahem! "Due to page count issues, the afterword is only two pages this time. That just seems dumb, so I'm leaving it to you. L."

Huh? Only... two pages? W-Wait a minute! Two pages?! And you made me waste precious lines reading that letter?! I still have so much to say! The *Slayers* series wouldn't even exist without—

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 6

THE DARKNESS IN VEZENDI



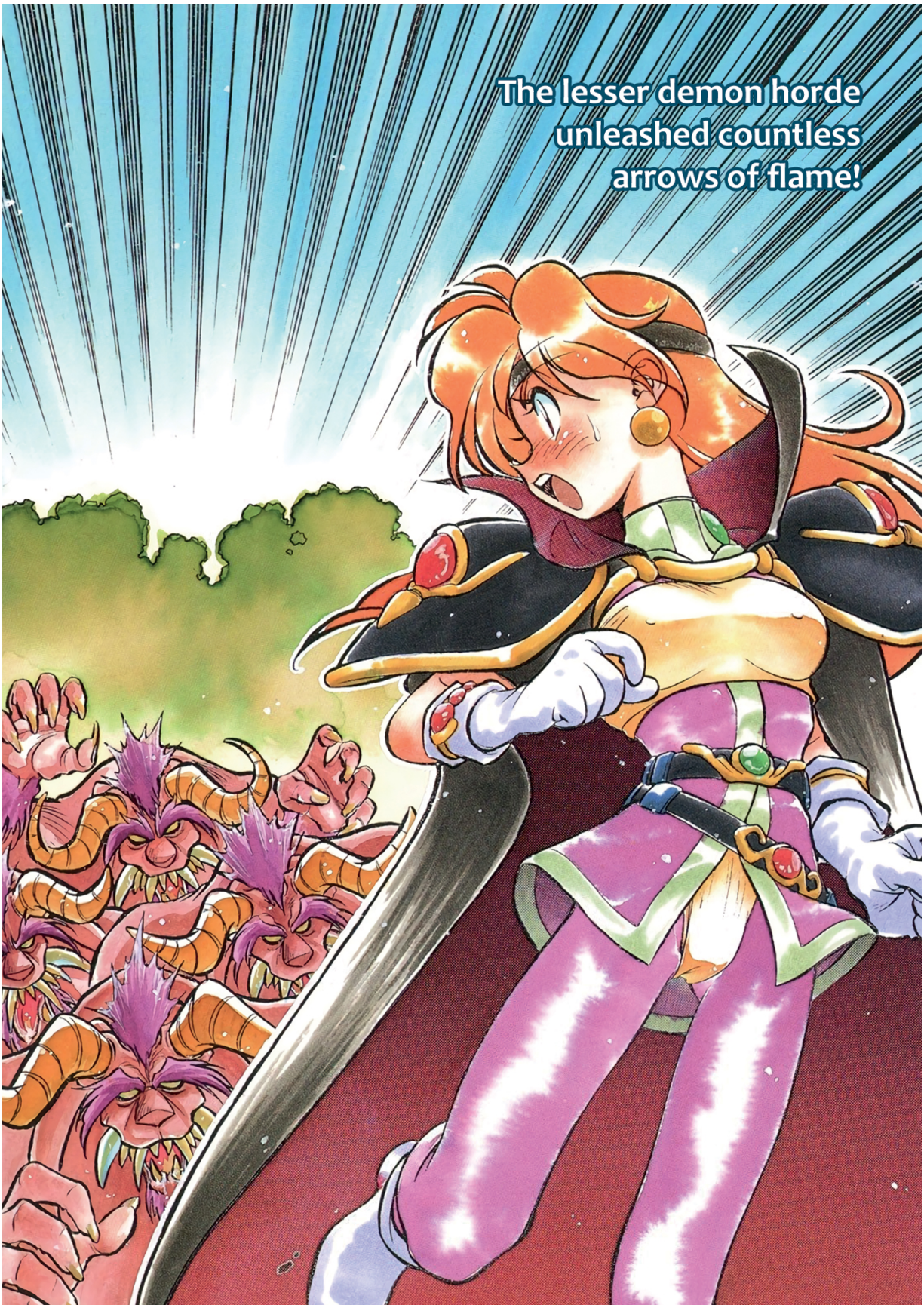
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Two demons
stood in the shadows...
And they weren't alone.

The lesser demon horde
unleashed countless
arrows of flame!





Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

I've really been looking forward to our fireside chat this time, because I'm actually still trying to parse the *Evolution-R* retelling of this volume.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, this was an interesting one. In some ways it's the closest adaptation from a novel we've had since volume 1.

[Meg/ED]

And in others, it's one of the most confusing! A lot of the details and buildup are the same, yet they add up to a head-scratcher of an ending for me.

But instead of dividing this between the similarities and differences, maybe we should just start at the beginning and go from there?

[Liz/TL]

That's pretty easy to do because the adaptation is so close, by which I mean that it follows the course of events almost to the letter... With the caveat that the Xellos/Claire Bible running plot stuff has already been covered by *NEXT*, so it gets replaced with material from *Evo-R*'s own original running plot. For instance, Raltark the Butler gets replaced by Ozzel the Maid, who's been a major force through the *Revolution/Evo-R* plot. Ozzel has her own character and priorities, but having her there instead of Raltark doesn't meaningfully alter the flow of events the way that, say, starting the Saillune arc with Amelia already in the party

and Prince Phil faking his own death did.

[Meg/ED]

That's the sort of variation I've come to expect at this point, although I suppose the concurrent plots take a little bit of the mystery out of the situation. Hellmaster's Jar is openly on the table, for example, whereas Lina & Co. show up in Vezendi in the novels with absolutely no idea why Zuma has targeted Laddock.

[Liz/TL]

That's true. The Hellmaster's Jar is the MacGuffin of this season of the anime, and Laddock has it—it makes things a little more expedient in some ways, since it means Lina has to stick around for that, and we don't need the slightly more complicated psychological reasons she has for putting up with Laddock's abuse (although we do still get some of those scenes!).

But in terms of the flow of the plot, we still have Zuma, who lost his arms to Lina and Gourry in a previous plotline, showing up again to invite them to Vezendi so he can have his revenge. And we still have Lina and Gourry showing up in town, and getting noticed by a local ragamuffin who brings them to Laddock's house to get a reward.

[Meg/ED]

At this point, I was thinking, "Oh, okay, we're really playing this one by the book." (Haha.) But then Laddock walks on screen... and he's not even shouting at anyone!

[Liz/TL]

One interesting change they do make is that we see him give the kid his reward, and so we actually see the kinder side of his personality that we only hear about in the novel—a nice bit of show-don't-tell that serves the format well.

Granted, I also like the sense of mystery it cultivates in the novel, that we keep hearing about this gentler side and never see it ever.

On the other hand, I feel like the anime never... really goes there with Laddock? I was expecting to hear Nobuo Tobita really hamming it up, but he's more gruff than he is angry. The anime doesn't do as much with characters "detecting hostility" from each other (for obvious reasons) so they probably didn't need his bellowing as a cover for Zuma's hatred.

[Meg/ED]

It's quite humanizing to see a side of him other than turned-up-to-ten mad. But there's a funny consequence, because it makes Abel look all the more like the bad guy at the start.

[Liz/TL]

I think they needed to red herring that Abel is Zuma, because otherwise it's really obvious that Laddock looks exactly like him! Secret identities are a lot easier to preserve in less-visual media, haha.

[Meg/ED]

Ahaha, I hadn't considered that. I just assumed it was a way to add a little intrigue back into the story. Once we fully realize what's going on, though, it's fun to look back at those scenes through the lens of "Abel is suspicious of his father" rather than "Abel is suspicious."

So, all in all, I think *Evolution-R* does both father and son some justice.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I think that aspect is nicely adapted. And we get what was promised us in the vol. 3 afterword, which is Zuma's

proper backstory!

[Meg/ED]

Indeed! You and I have speculated previously about some of the new, additional, or supplementary material that fleshes out certain arcs of the anime adaptation. (Looking at you, volumes 2 and 3!) But L was courteous enough to explain in the newer edition of the volume 3 afterword that it came straight from the horse's mouth this time, so to speak.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, and I like what they went with—it's consistent with the things that we know from the novel, and you could maybe speculate it was something in that ballpark based on the novel alone. But you probably wouldn't guess those specific events!

[Meg/ED]

Evolution-R makes for a satisfying watch after reading this volume... up to a point.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, the choice to do an almost blow-by-blow adaptation, with changes made in deference to a totally different running plot, is, let's say, a bit of a double-edged sword. So let's get to the other edge in this case.

[Meg/ED]

Demon ex machina? That's the part I'm still struggling to get my head around.

[Liz/TL]

Well, first demons first—Guduza and Duguld are there, and show up in the exact same contexts they do in the novel! They even have a fight in the barrier space at the inn but... Seigram is not involved, obviously, so they just ignore Lina

and Gourry to fight Zelgadis and Amelia and if it's explained why they do this I must have missed it.

[Meg/ED]

We're left as oblivious as Lina is. It's played for laughs since she, rightfully, doesn't take kindly to being ignored. But it does leave some unanswered questions.

At this juncture in the novels, Seigram and Zuma are our two multi-volume villains (if you draw a distinction between Rezo and copy-Rezo, that is). Fusing them was a fun plot twist I didn't see coming when I first read the books myself. But since Seigram was iced in *NEXT*, one of said unanswered questions by the tavern fight episode is... who *did* he fuse with, presuming he still did?

[Liz/TL]

I believe he says he used the Hellmaster's Jar to subjugate Guduza and Duguld, who were previously pacted to the Red Priest. Since he then takes them in to enhance his new arms, maybe he was using any number of other unnamed Rezo-demons before them? Either way, though, it's definitely not the equal-partners fusion with a single named demon like it is in the novel. Zuma has them completely in his thrall.

[Meg/ED]

An arrangement that doesn't work out for any of them, huh?

Guduza and Duguld are recalled from their fights with Amelia and Zelgadis respectively to assist Zuma as he takes on Lina... and that's about all she wrote. I was a little perturbed at first that Amelia and Zel don't get their moments to shine against their demon rivals, but Lina really doesn't get hers either!

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, you're following the scenes from the novel pretty closely, and then Zuma just murders Guduza and Duguld, and then Xellos murders Zuma!

[Meg/ED]

In an extremely unceremonious fashion, no less. There's this really tragic twist where Laddock kills his own son, and that's pretty quickly undercut by Xellos showing up out of nowhere and absolutely destroying the guy...

[Liz/TL]

Admittedly, I got a pretty big laugh out of him bursting out of his chest with a ☺ face.

[Meg/ED]

It is kinda funny in a way it probably shouldn't be...

[Liz/TL]

But Xellos steals the scene so hard I'd actually completely forgotten that Zuma kills Abel just before. Wow!

[Meg/ED]

It's a blindside for sure. Why did we spend several episodes building up the pathos for *that*? It's not like the *Slayers* anime to darken a plot, but that was certainly a choice.

[Liz/TL]

It's all very strange. The only thing I can think of, at least for why Xellos gets that last kill, is that maybe they don't want Lina killing someone who's still technically human. Unless I'm misremembering, I don't think the anime ever goes there.

[Meg/ED]

I'm having trouble thinking of an example that was seriously rendered rather than haha-style cartoon violence.

[Liz/TL]

Which might also be why the anime never tried to adapt volume 5's cultist plot, beyond Duclis showing up in a totally different context. Lina can blow up a town with a Dragon Slave and they can otherwise do violence to humans in comic relief ways, but otherwise I think their human opponents are either killed by someone else (Eris and Halciform), or survive and become good guys (Zangulus and Vrumugun).

[Meg/ED]

I mean, who's to say what really happens to all those blown-up bandits?

Nevertheless, that's part of the reason Abel's death really threw me for a loop. Chris slaying Alfred back in volume 4 was pretty heartbreaking, so I understood treading that road differently in the lighter-hearted tone and style of the anime... but things took a turn for the darker here. Sadly, I suppose it's just easier to tie up the loose ends of this storyline without Abel around.

[Liz/TL]

That's very possible. They don't have the downtime to escort Abel back to town, and they want to keep the momentum going for the running plotline, so getting rid of all the arc characters and focusing things back on Xellos makes sense from an expedience perspective, even if I think it diminishes the impact of the arc itself a bit. Granted, having read the novel first in this case, I'm going to be biased to its priorities, which just aren't the same as the anime's priorities.

[Meg/ED]

It's something of a confounding capstone for me. I'll

probably be chewing on it for a while. I love that the anime is still getting mileage out of Rezo in season 4 (or 5, depending on how you count), but the death of Zuma-Seigram now means all of our known major villains have had their due.

Except... there *is* that sneaky butler who got away.

[Liz/TL]

But how much harm could a little butler do?

[Meg/ED]

Shall we just say that volume 7 opens with a bang?

[Liz/TL]

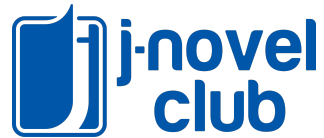
Just another day in the life of Lina...

[Meg/ED]

Girl can't catch a break! I guess it's fair to say someone, uh, much bigger is after her now... but I'm sure we'll get into that next time. For now, finally, it's on to Dils!

[Liz/TL]

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